

Strategies that help Bangladeshi e-commerce start-ups to scale-up

It has something to do with routines

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Adnan & Doinita

Abstract

Title: Strategies that help Bangladeshi e-commerce start-ups to scale-up. *It has something to do with routines.*

Background:

Bangladesh is one of the fastest growing economies of the world. Entrepreneurs play in this context a key role, driving economic growth and fostering innovation. Bangladesh's start-up ecosystem has thus significantly grown during the last ten years, where many successful start-ups have developed in various industries, being the e-commerce sector one of the most attractive ones. However, despite the fact that the e-commerce sector has shown a huge potential in Bangladesh, only a few start-ups have successfully scaled-up their business. Therefore, focusing on the e-commerce sector of Bangladesh as case of study, this research aims to analyse how organisational routines can bring stability and change in the start-ups' scale-up process. In our study we considered the nature of organisational routines in general and its specific impact on the way start-ups change and grow. The results of this study, obtained mainly through interviews with key actors from different Bangladeshi start-ups, indicate the possibility of rising the awareness about this subject as a strategy for improving a start-up's development.

Purpose:

We aim to find what role do organisational routines play in start-ups in their scaling-up stage.

Methodology:

This qualitative study conducted interviews with 6 e-commerce start-ups in Bangladesh. Out of these 6 start-ups, 2 have successfully scaled-up, 2 start-ups are on the process of scaling-up, and 2 start-ups have failed to scale-up their business.

Findings:

The study provides evidence that the more organised a start-up is in terms of routines, the more agile and successful it becomes. Therefore, organisational routines improves the start-up performance and encourage change.

Keywords: start-up, e-commerce start-up from Bangladesh, organisational routines, routines as change, routines as stability.

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1. Introduction

A nation's economic development depends heavily on its entrepreneurs. They are the catalyst for innovation, job growth and economic prosperity. Entrepreneurs boost economic growth at different levels and enhance community well-being by creating new products, services, and technologies. Entrepreneurs use their abilities, resources, and knowledge to transform their business ideas into profitable ventures. However, despite their enthusiasm and passion to make a sustainable profitable venture, Aldrich and Yang (2014) mention that a majority of initiatives fail after a few years, while only a small percentage succeeds in surviving and converting their initiative into a successful venture. The authors further continue (p. 1104) “though entrepreneurship is purposeful, it is an evolutionary process of trial-and-error, and failure is more likely than success”. In this sense, a crucial phase of the start-up life cycle is the scale-up stage, and many start-up founders seriously struggle with this phase. Entrepreneurs need then to transform their capacity and they must develop “know-how,” “know what,” and “know who” knowledge (Argote and Miron-Spektor, 2011). In other words, learning is a continuous process and entrepreneurs need to improve their capacities in different stages of the start-up lifecycle.

During such learning and improvement processes, organisational routines might appear and consolidate within the start-up organisation, even though the entrepreneurs themselves might not realise and explicitly reflect upon them.

When we think about organisational routines, we may think of them as something mundane and rigid, something that organisations do on a regular basis without making much effort (Cohen, 2007). However, routines can have a major influence both on the stability of an organisation (Cohen, Burkhart, Dosi, Egidi, Marengo, Warglien, and Winter, 1996) as well as on the way it changes, evolves (Nelson and Winter, 1982), hence indicating whether the organisation eventually succeeds or fails.

The objective of this thesis is to propose an analysis of the relationship between, on the one hand, start-ups which are commonly perceived as a young type of organisation without major constraints and, on the other hand, organisational routines as a way of managing business processes.

Inasmuch as organisational routines are “repetitive, recognisable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors” (Feldman and Pentland, 2003: 105) which can

contribute to the understanding and improvement of the organisation in general, organisational routines appear as a possible key to analyse the possible enhancement of a start-up, more specifically in the process of its scale-up, i.e. in the phase in which routines might emerge. In order to accomplish our objective, we have chosen as a case of study a set of contemporary start-ups – successful, surviving and unsuccessful – from the e-commerce field in Bangladesh.

1.1 Problem definition

The relationship between routines and start-ups appears as a relevant problem to be researched because most of the literature has mainly focused on the organisational routines of companies in general, without properly differentiating their different scales, sizes and specific phases of development. However, when we speak about start-ups, we need to emphasise the fact that start-ups work differently and face variable, even unique challenges, profoundly different from the ones proper to well-established organisations (Jones and Schou, 2022). It is therefore relevant to mention that very few studies have focused on organisational routines in the start-up context (Dahl and Reichstein, 2005), pointing indirectly at a lack of attention to the importance of organisational routines for the successful development of this type of organisation. Thus, the problem addressed by this research is meant to identify and contribute to tackle this research gap.

As we have already mentioned, despite the entrepreneurs' ideas and abilities for starting a profitable business, the majority of initiatives eventually fail, with only a small percentage becoming successful businesses (Aldrich and Yang, 2014). Entrepreneurship is thus a purposeful, yet most of the times likely to fail. This evolutionary process of entrepreneurship is precisely proper for start-ups, i.e. from the perspective of their specific way of changing, that we propose to identify organisational routines as well as their function within the start-ups' development. In this sense, *the problem to be addressed in this study is the specific role that organisational routines might play in the success and failure of start-ups*. The corresponding findings of this research might then contribute to a better understanding of start-ups in their scaling-up process and adaptation to change.

Furthermore, Bangladesh appears as a suitable case of study for this research because this country has seen in recent years a sharp rise in the number of start-ups and entrepreneurs, where entrepreneurship has become a growing trend in the nation. In order to address different

national challenges, many young entrepreneurs in Bangladesh have been launching start-ups in industries like technology, e-commerce and social entrepreneurship.

However, most of the entrepreneurs in Bangladesh do not possess the appropriate educational background and entrepreneurs consider often that education is not a significant factor in doing business, commonly inspired by stories of successful entrepreneurs without a formal university degree. This combines with the fact that, in general terms, most start-up entrepreneurs in Bangladesh do not believe that routines can make a positive difference in their organisation, since they are not aware of the impact of routines in the scaling-up process.

Therefore, the findings and understanding of this research concerning the relationship between Bangladeshi start-ups and organisational routines might also contribute to raising awareness about the importance of identifying routines within start-ups in their scale-up stage.

1.2 Research question

Up to 80% of start-ups fail in their first year (Bryant, 2022), meaning that only around 20% are eventually successful in the early stage, advancing towards the scale-up stage. However, at the scale-up stage the statistics of success are also not encouraging. In spite of all the successful accomplishments and experience that the start-up might have obtained until this stage, many start-ups fail to scale-up the business and are forced to quit overnight.

Therefore, driven by the fact that start-ups have a high failure rate, we are questioning whether the enhancement of organisational routines can reduce this rate. Our research question is formulated as follows:

What role do organisational routines play in start-ups in their scaling-up stage?

To answer the main question, we formulated the following supporting sub-questions:

- 1. Why might we consider that organisational routines are crucial to start-ups in the scaling-up stage?*
- 2. Can organisational routines improve start-ups' performance and encourage change in the scaling-up process?*

3. What organisational routines should e-commerce start-ups follow during the scaling-up stage?

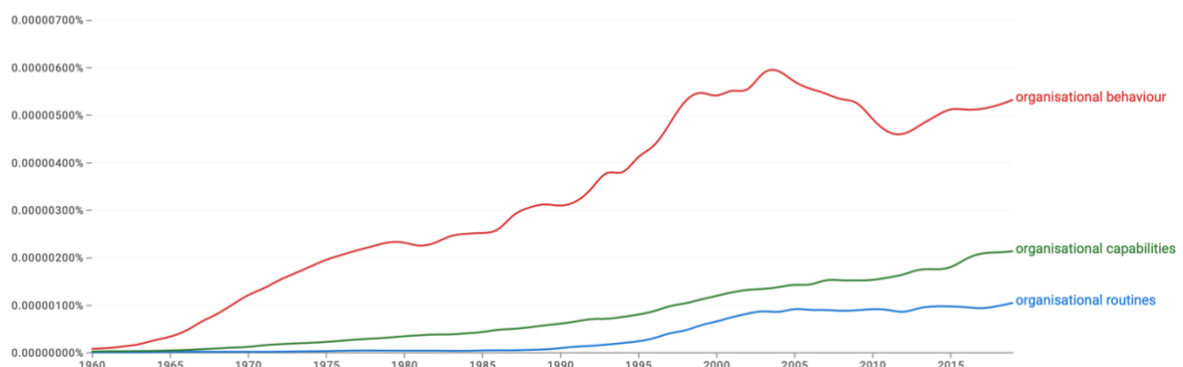
2. Theoretical background

2.1 What are organisational routines?

This section will primarily focus on the pattern of actions known as *organisational routines* (Cohen, et al., 1996). For the purpose of this research, we will sometimes also refer to this term as “routines”. The necessity to introduce the concept of routines came from the need to understand the behaviour and way of changing of organisations (Nelson and Winter, 1982). Routines, understood in a generic sense, are “forms, rules, procedures, conventions, strategies, and technologies” with the help of which organisations are formed and become operational (Levitt and March, 1988).

The topic of organisational routines began to attract more of the researchers’ attention as a publication subject in the 1990s. This is reflected in the Ngram viewer (n.d), which renders an analysis of the data available in the Google books database. Yet, compared with other topics, organisational routines continue to be a minor subject of research (see, Figure 1, where the recurrence of “organisational routines” is compared, just as an example, to the other terms such as “organisational behaviour” and “organisational capabilities”).

Figure 1: Organisational routines compared to other terms
(NGRAM Viewer, n.d)



Let us now define what routines are, while highlighting their relevance for the organisational performance.

Stinchcombe (1990) defines routines as a skill that is performed repetitively by employees so that they perform it more accurately and faster each time. In this sense, we can deduce that routines are based rather on past activities than on the anticipations of future events (Levitt and March, 1988).

Lee, Rho, Kim and Jun (2007), highlight not only the rise of the need of routines within a company but also the situation in which routines are not formed straight away. In other words, at the very initial phase of a company, routines might not yet have been formed. In the case of start-ups, only when the start-up starts to develop and scale-up, then the routines are being formed. Thus, we will proceed to take a closer look at how organisational routines are related to the development of start-ups. Let us depart from a more detailed definition of organisational routines.

Based on the works of previous scholars from different fields, Becker and Lazaric (2009) indicate that organisational routines are the main source for understanding three crucial aspects: 1) the way in which organisations perform their tasks, 2) the evolution of an organisation over time and 3) how organisations accumulate, apply, and transfer organisational capabilities. In other words, a significant part of a company's work is embodied in routines. In this sense, we can understand that routines are an integral part of a company, which does not imply only one aspect but rather a multitude of processes. This makes of routines a complex aspect to be defined.

Becker and Lazaric's first crucial aspect on how organisations perform their tasks can be explained through a path or chain of activities performed by an organisation (e.g.: suppliers quality check, product data analysis, etc.), that also forms the organisational memory. Organisational memory is the knowledge of an organisation that was collected from previous experience and help an organisation in the decision-making process (Bhandary and Maslach, 2016). In the terms of Levitt and March (1988), the organisational memory encodes, stores and retrieves the lessons learnt from past activities despite the fact of eventual personnel turnover. Therefore, routines are collected in the organisational memory.

This chain of activities that embodies a variety of routines, is performed naturally by the employees, and most of the time, without having any written rules. Cohen and Bacdayan (1994)

showed that, from a cognitive perspective, routines are stored as *procedural memory*, meaning that they are not ready for discursive processing. This type of routine is based on tacit knowledge and informal procedures (Hodgson, 2009). The routines as tacit knowledge cannot be designed by somebody alone regardless of the intellectual capacity she/he might have, because this type of routines emerges gradually through collective learning. We need to distinguish between *procedural memory* and *declarative memory*, the difference being that the latter can be codified, hence stored through facts, propositions and events (Cohen and Bacdayan, 1994).

In a nutshell, through the improvement of activities or chain of tasks in time and through repetition, organisations shape their routines as activities belonging to the organisational memory. This remains a procedural, implicit type of memory. The organisation is therefore shaped in the form of the routines, this is why tracing and understanding an organisation's routine can deeply explain how it works in both general and particular aspects.

The second crucial aspect of routines identified by Becker and Lazaric on the evolution of an organisation over time, can be mainly analysed from the perspective of routines as a factor of change, where routines are changing over time. We will explain this in detail in the section 2.1.1 of our study, dedicated to routines as a factor of stability and change.

The third and last crucial aspect mentioned by Becker and Lazaric, specifically on how organisations accumulate, apply and transfer organisational capabilities, can be explained thanks to the work of Winter (1995: 2), who mentioned that “the knowledge underlying a routine is embodied or embedded to a large extent in its associated human, physical and organisational capital”. This implies that routines depend on a group of individuals. Each of these individuals have different skills and capabilities but are interlocked in a common structure that forms the collective qualities and intellectual capabilities of a company. In other words, although some routines are implicit (first aspect) and might evolve in time (second aspect), they can be nevertheless traced, identified and understood. Therefore, routines encompass almost every aspect of the organisation, hence underlining the importance and significant relation to the organisation as a whole.

2.1.1 Routines as a factor of stability and change

What researchers could not agree on is the perspective from which the routines are analysed (table 1). More specifically, there are two perspectives from which routines are analysed. Routines have been understood either as a source of stability or as a source of change. On the one hand, the stability comes from the activities carried out mindlessly, i.e. people do not pay much thinking to how the activity is performed and, on the other hand, change comes from the consciousness, from people understanding the action they perform and making sense of their actions (Fledman and Pentland, 2003; Lindkvist, Bengtsson, Svensson and Wahlstedt, 2016). Pentland, Feldman, Becker and Liu (2012: 2) demonstrated that in order to explain the dynamics of organisational routines “variation and selective retention of patterns of action are necessary and sufficient”. By dynamics the authors meant the “formation, inertia, endogenous change, and learning” of the organisation over time.

Table 1: The perspective of researchers in regard to organisational routines

Characteristics of routines	Studies	Supporting arguments
Routines as a source of stability	Weiss and Ilgen (1985)	Routines are accompanied by reduced information search and receptivity
	Cohen, et al. (1996)	Routines as a stable feature, reproducible over time or space
Routines as a source of change	Nelson and Winter (1982)	Routines modify various aspects of operating characteristics.
	Levitt and March (1988)	Routines change in response to organisational experience, mainly through trial-and-error experimentation and through organisational search.
	Fledman (2000); Fledman and Pentland (2003)	Routine as an organisational aspect full of life

As Cohen, et al. (1996) stated, it is common to think that organisational routines are a stable feature. The approach of routines as a source of stability is explained by the fact that

implementing routines is seen by scholars as a lack of receptivity and awareness from the organisation and as a reduced tendency to search for information (Weiss and Ilgen, 1985). However, the idea of a minor search for information is highly debatable by the scholars who see routines as a source of change. Cohen et al., (1996) further state that as long as the routine suggests a familiar course of action then the employees will ignore the new information, thus, blocking the novelty in an organisation.

The easiest way to explain how routines create change is through the work of March (1981: 564) who stated that the change in an organisation comes not from the extraordinary processes, uncommon imagination or special skills, but from “relatively stable, routine processes that relate organisations to their environments”. Therefore, routines that create the most significant organisational change require ordinary things to be done in a competent way.

Nelson and Winter (1982) stated that there are two necessary conditions to be fulfilled in order for routines to be combined with innovation ¹. First, routines should be reliable, meaning that routines were previously tested, and no obstacles are stopping the routines to achieve a full performance. This can be done through a trial-and-error process. Second, a routine should be free from any other application of routines, meaning that the same routine cannot be applied for different types of activities even if those activities might seem related. For example, the shipping of a fragile product requires other routines than the ones for a rigid product. So, routines are implemented by organisations to deal with various aspects of operating characteristics.

According to Levitt and March (1988), the change of routines is possible due to organisational experience, and it is done mainly through two mechanisms. First, as mentioned above, through trial-and-error processes. That means that the organisation learns from accidental experience and from pragmatic inventions out of necessity (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972). Lindkvist, et al., (2016) also concluded that through a combination of trial-and-error learning processes the change of routines can be achieved. Second, through organisational search (an approach also sustained by Nelson and Winter (1982)), meaning that from a multitude of routines the organisations will adopt the best ones that are discovered and prove to be successful. Of course,

¹ Nelson and Winter (1982), mention that the concepts of routines and innovation are commonly regarded as opposed ideas. This is explained through the argument that, in order to achieve innovation, an organisation should deviate from routinised behaviour (Lewis, 2003; Schumpeter, 1934).

here it depends not only on how many routines there are (in the system of the organisation) but also on how intensively the organisation is searching for better ones.

Furthermore, the change in an organisation via routines does not mean that the organisation combines the existing routines, creating in such a way an innovation of routinised work (Nelson and Winter, 1982), it means rather that already created routines change through the ongoing accomplishments (Fledman and Pentland, 2003). Fledman and Pentland explain that employees who engage in a routinised work adjust their actions constantly since they develop new understanding about what they do, and they see the consequences of their actions. This means that through routines employees show that they know their job, as they are able to interpret and respond to the messages that other employees send (Nelson and Winter, 1982). This interaction between employees which forms routines do not represent an inert aspect of an organisation but rather an aspect full of life (Fledman, 2000). Feldman and Pentland (2003) called the process of bringing routines to life the performative aspect, meaning that the routines are adjusted to the new context, whereas the ostensive aspect “enables people to guide, account for, and refer to specific performances” (2003: 94). These two aspects would explain change in an organisation via routines.

2.1.2 Routines as a factor contributing to exploration and exploitation

We mentioned above that routines are seen as a source of stability but also as a source of change. For the purpose of this study, we can associate stability with exploitation and change with exploration. According to March (1991), exploitation refers to what is known, whereas exploration to what might be known. In such a case, we can associate routines contributing both to the exploration and the exploitation. Few researchers agree upon that routines can negatively affect the innovativeness of an organisation, while most seem to show that the opposite might rather be true, since routines have been observed to have a positive influence the development of an organisation (Pentland, Haerem and Hillision, 2009).

Now, considering the characteristics of start-ups, which have an explorative approach, we can conclude that routines do not harm in anyway this type of organisation. Then, routines require less and less conscious actions (Nelson and Winter, 1982), but still can be incorporated into a start-up organisation in the scale-up process. In other words, it is possible to have an explorative approach and still maintain routines. This also means that it is possible to understand what

approach the company chose (exploration or exploitation) by analysing the content of the procedures which the company performs or, in other words, the specific employees' tasks.

Routines as an exploitation factor

First, let us define what exploitation is. James March introduced the concepts of exploration and exploitation in 1991. In his article (1995: 184), the author explains that exploitation refers to the short-term improvement of “new ideas, paradigms, technologies, strategies and knowledge”. Exploitation also means the repetition of an action, which in turn leads to doing things faster. Similarly, routines are also about repetition of a certain pattern (Winter, 1995; Nelson and Winter, 1982), so that by doing a task mechanically, employees work faster. This turns to be a source for generating performance (Pentland, et al., 2009), and not a sporadic flash of genius (Stinchcombe, 1990). In organisational routines, the performance is based on collective actions, and in such a way, it creates efficient structures (Cohen and Bacdayan, 1994). As Winter (1995: 9) mentions “the context of each individual performance includes the performances of other members”. So, we can conclude that routines are at the basis of team performance. Taking this into account, large organisations are considering the replication of routines for utilising the routines that created best performance and in such a way obtain a greater profit (Winter and Szulanski, 2000).

Of course, routines can also affect the efficiency of an organisation when being applied in inappropriate situations (for instance, too many procedural checks causing the employees to be focused too much on them). So, start-ups in the scale-up process should be careful with implementing routines and not get blinded by its routines. To avoid this, organisations should also consider the change aspect of routines as it is explained in the sub-chapter above.

Routines as a source for exploration

We might question how a stable behaviour pattern, or a rule can help in accomplishing innovative tasks (Becker and Zirpoli, 2009), given the fact that innovation by itself presupposes changes that can be of many types (incremental, radical, disruptive, etc.). This problem has been addressed by Becker and Zirpoli, explaining the fact that routines are a contributing factor in the innovation activities, while arguing that a company can choose to enhance not only an

exploitational approach but also an explorational one, thanks to routinised work. In this sense, routines can lead not only to exploitation but also exploration approaches.

We need to go back to James March for the definition of exploration. The author further explains that exploration is “exploration of new ideas, paradigms, technologies, strategies and knowledge in the hope of finding alternatives that improve an old one” (March, 1995: 184).

While it can appear more obvious how a company has an exploitation approach through the implementation of routines (e.g. via standard operational procedures (SOP)), it might appear more difficult to detect the exploration approach in the routinised work. Weiss and Ilgen (1985), for instance, stated that routines constrain exploration.

Nevertheless, according to Becker and Zirpoli, routinised tasks can imply and have a direct impact on searching processes, thus creating a proper environment for exploration. We might, therefore, assume that by choosing non-conventional solutions, the routinised work can lead not only to incremental innovation but even to radical innovation. An example of such a case is demonstrated by Hargadon and Sutton (2000), mainly underlining that taking brainstorming as a routine can lead to radical innovation, and ideally, to success. Of course, it would be a biased thinking if we consider that only by implementing an unconventional solution a company can be led to success, we should also consider other factors that are essential for achieving a routinised procedure that embraces an exploration approach. Becker and Zirpoli state, for example, that among other elements, the organisation’s structure and the management style should be taken into account.

2.1.3 Selection of routines for research purposes

The selection of routines varies from research to research, routines are visible in any department of an organisation. Routines are seen in the hiring and training processes, in the budgeting and research and so on.

Salvato (2009), for example, analysed in his research the product development routines, a routine that in the analysed company, it had the most intense strategic adaptation. This routine was in turn split up into two sub-routines, namely data source and data analysis. D’Adderio’s

(2009) analysis also addressed the product development routine, but with a focus on other sub-routines relevant for the interviewed company.

Hence, from the multitude of routines that an organisation has, researchers analysed either the core ones or the ones that are interesting to investigate.

2.2 What is a start-up?

“Having in mind the life cycle of a company, we can place start-ups at the initial phase of development (Zajko, 2017). Start-ups are “young companies founded to develop a unique product or service” (Baldrige, 2022). Luger and Koo (2005: 17) summarised the work of start-up scholars underlining that start-ups are the main source of “job creation, technological innovation, and consequent regional growth”. Moreover, start-ups have a different working culture with a carefree spirit, having flexible working hours and overall an almost family-like environment. In addition, start-ups have an advantage over large organisations in terms of agility, flexibility and quick decision-making process. Large corporations have access to resources that start-ups can only imagine but the former is not as agile as the latter. By agility we mean that the organisation is making changes in the planning and implementing of their work as according to the needs (Agile, 2023). In short, start-ups deal with high uncertainty, excessive flexibility and also unique products and services (Haase and Eberl, 2019).

Equally important is to mention that the average age of entrepreneurs in Bangladesh is around 28 years old. Moreover, around 62% of them are under the age of 35 according to the data from 2022 (Wing, 2023). Hence, the CEO of start-ups, due to their young age, have limited previous experience and this might be one of the multiple reasons why only 80% of start-ups manage to survive their first year of activity, according to data from 2021 (Bryant, 2022).

In this study, we will focus on start-ups in the scale-up stage. The scale-up process is described as “developing a powerful sales and marketing, building an organisation by hiring and managing diverse groups of people, and knowing how to acquire strategic inputs such as the right kinds of capital and suppliers” (Zajko, 2017: 1). This means that at this stage start-ups should, for example, make decisions in the following areas: strategy, execution, people and financials (Harnish, 2014). In this sense, the scale-up process is closely related to the

Most important, we chose the teleological scope because it is from this perspective that the role of routine appears. Van De Ven and Poole (1995: 522) explained that routines appear mainly in the constructive mode of change, when the entity passes through unprecedented novel forms: “a constructive mode, in contrast, produces new action routines that may (or may not) create an original reformulation of the entity”. Following a teleological mode of change, Lindkvist, et al., (2016: 14) also observed that “the pulling the power of goals” coming from the open-ended mode of change, is closely related to the emergence of routines, which can be viewed as directional. Indirectly, Levitt and March (1988) also are inclined to the idea that it is more likely that a routine will be used if it is associated with success of achieving a goal.

We need to emphasise that we did not choose the Life cycle model for our analysis, even if it also analyses the organisation from a single unit of change. The reason for this choice is that the progression proper to the Life cycle model is based on a necessary sequence of stages. However, start-ups in the scale-up process are not governed by any sequence but rather by the direction given through its goal.

2.3 Implementing routines in start-ups: importance and risks

Even though routines are mostly seen as a stabilising factor in the organisation’s behaviour (Argote and Greve, 2007), we could also see that routines are a source of flexibility in an organisation. That is why it is essential for start-ups, particularly in the scale-up process, to introduce and implement routines. Furthermore, it is most important to remember that it is from the perspective of the teleological scope that the role of routine appears (van De Ven and Poole, 1995: 522) in the scale-up process of start-ups.

Moreover, start-ups are unique. The competitive advantage of start-ups is their innovative approach. From Stinchcombe’s (1990) perspective, routines themselves can be a source of competitive advantage. Nevertheless, this is only in the case when the company improves the speed of the routines and changes regularly their detailed content. So, we come again to the idea that routines are used in an exploration approach. Stinchcombe (1990) dares to mention that even if routinisation can destroy entrepreneurial spirit, this destruction turns into something more profitable - the routinisation of innovation. The routinisation of innovation means that innovations can be more quickly spread into the market.

Furthermore, within established firms, there are separate routines for each of the company's task (e.g. marketing, management or R&D). The founder and the board management infiltrate the routines that they gained from previous experience and that already proved to be successful (Dahl and Reichstein, 2005). We can therefore understand that routines are formed through a trial-and-error process until the new routine is fully functional (Levitt and March, 1988; Hsu and Marino, 2010) and thus contribute to the change of the organisations (Lindkvist, et al., 2016).

We can thus conclude that routinisation, if applied accordingly, can be used by start-ups in the scale-up process. Not only this, but it might even be profitable to use routines and gain a competitive advantage. However, we also need to consider the downsides of routines.

The downsides:

We might think that routines are not compatible with start-ups because the staff might miss at first sight obvious opportunities for improving their performance. It might be reasonable to accept this theory given the fact that indeed, by doing regularly the same task without paying much reflection on it can lead to blindness. Furthermore, routines can lead to path dependency (Pentland, et al., 2012). Path dependency means facing “difficulties in adapting to invasions by new routine sets, such as new technologies” (Argote and Greve, 2007: 341). This might represent a real threat for start-ups, since this dependency restricts the flexibility and adaptability of an organisation.

2.4 The context of Bangladesh

2.4.1 Economic background of Bangladesh

Bangladesh is the 8th most populated country in the world, the 35th largest and one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. It has a population of 170 million people, out of which 35 million represent the middle and the rising middle classes (Kalerkantho, 2023). After gaining its independence in 1971, Bangladesh started to demonstrate an extraordinary growth and development showing an impressive annual GDP growth rate of 6.5% over the last decade

(World Bank, n.d). Based on this, the World Bank projects that by 2031 the country will become an upper middle-income nation (World Bank, 2023).

Moreover, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in the readymade garments, agriculture, and leather sectors. Bangladesh has also boosted the development of IT infrastructure digital business and new tech start-ups are growing day by day. Today, 98% of the Bangladeshi population is under mobile phone connection, it has a 62% internet penetration and over 102 million people has an internet coverage (Dhaka Tribune, 2021).

Furthermore, Bangladesh is currently having demographic dividend where more than 50% are under 35 years (Jishad, 2022). In addition, Bangladesh middle class population is growing at 10% per annum and it is expected to reach 34 million by 2025 (The Financial Express, 2021). Due to this fact, the Bangladesh start-up ecosystem has evolved significantly over the past 10 years, earning over USD 800 million in funding, and creating more than 1,5 million job possibilities with an emphasis on sectors including Finance, Logistics & Mobility, and e-Commerce (The Financial Express, 2021). Related to the e-commerce field, there are currently more than 1.200 operational start-ups, and more than 200 new entities open each year.

The B2C e-commerce industry in Bangladesh had a steady growth, reaching annually around 9% growth. The industries forecasts on medium to long term looks even more promising, with an increase of around 7% during 2023-2026 (Research and Markets, 2023).

The Bangladesh B2C e-commerce market segmentate in following sectors: retail shopping, travel and hospitality, online food service, media and entertainment, healthcare and wellness, technology products and services (Research and Markets, 2023). In our empirical data, we will approach start-ups from retailing shopping, travel and hospitality and online food services.

2.4.2 Start-up ecosystem in Bangladesh

As we could see in the chapter above, the country's economy is raising day by day. However, Bangladeshi entrepreneurs face a plenty of challenges in different stages of their business.

The biggest challenges faced by start-up entrepreneurs in scaling-up their business are both internal and external. Internal challenges are hiring the right talent, poor business models, lack of capital, lack of ability to scale, protecting intellectual property. External challenges are

managing legal and regulatory obstacles, intense competition, market saturation, and access to funding. Furthermore, continuing the external challenges, there is a lack of entrepreneurial ecosystem including mentorship, incubators, innovation hubs, accelerators, and venture capital. The current government is trying to solve these issues, putting a strong emphasis on creating a digital Bangladesh. The start-up ecosystem could flourish by having variety of governmental incentives to streamline their operations in the near future.

Continuing the list of challenges, customers have lack of trust among e-commerce businesses, their trustiness is affected by numerous fraudulence issues. A wide range of e-commerce businesses are accused of scamming customers out of large amounts of money (Chowdhury, Bappi, Imtiaz, Hoque, Islam and Haque, 2022).

All these challenges shape the start-ups performance. So, start-ups should deal them having limited resources, and this does not reflect an encouraging perspective as there are many mighty failures in the e-commerce start-up history. But what is failure if not a source of learning (Edmondson, 2011).

3. Methodology

In this study we used a qualitative research method. According to Malhotra (2019), qualitative research is an unstructured, exploratory research methodology based on small samples that provide insights and understanding. The data was collected through primary and secondary sources, including interviews with management teams and key stakeholders from Bangladeshi start-ups which are in the scale-up process.

We should mention that we distinguish three types of start-ups throughout our study: the ones that have proven to be successful, the ones that are surviving and the ones that failed. Let us make a more detailed distinction between these types of start-ups. For the purpose of our study, we mean the following (Kalyanasundaram, 2018):

1. The successful ones have sufficient revenues to cover their costs for proper functioning.
2. The surviving or unsuccessful ones are not able to fully cover its operational costs.

3. The ones that failed in doing the business means they are no longer on the market offering their goods and services.

3.1 Sample Selection

In order to choose companies for research interviews, we conducted desk research as a first step. We have gone through web resources including start-up directories, industry reports and news stories to find the right start-up for the interview. Additionally, we have prepared a database of the start-up's mentioning their current situation, user base, tractions, location, and user reviews. Moreover, after completing the database, we communicated with the e-commerce association of Bangladesh (e-Cab) to know more details about these start-ups to validate our findings.

Based on all these analyses we have categorised start-ups in terms of successful, struggling, and quitting and shortlisted 10 start-ups to reach and conduct interviews. However, we only got positive consent from 6 start-ups to participate in this interview (in total 8 employees) and one board member of the e-commerce association.

In this study, we use a purposive sampling technique and interview a small number of e-commerce companies in Bangladesh that have the necessary insights to let us extract the answers for each of our research questions. Among all the information gathered from the interview, we identified different types of routines. However, we decided to focus only on 3 routines that we thought would give us enough insights for our research.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

We have interviewed 6 start-ups (9 interviews, on average 45 minutes per interview), mostly from Dhaka city (the capital of Bangladesh) but operating all over the country (table 2). It was particularly difficult to spot the correct start-ups for this study, mainly because there are plenty of start-ups who claim to be in the scale-up stage, but based on the given facts and data, they do not fulfil yet conditions of the scale-up stage. In the beginning, we used start-up directories, industry publications, and news to conduct our desk research. It helped us to determine which

start-ups were appropriate for our research question and goals. Moreover, we have considered the start-ups from the same industry to identify the similarity of their working process.

Table 2: List of interviewed start-ups

No	Interviewee	Company Type	Role	Interview length (min)	Date dd-mm-yy	Type of the call	Interview type
1	Start-up A	Surviving	CEO	65 Min	28-03-23	Video-call	Semi-structured
2			COO	30 Min	29-03-23	Video-call	Un-structured
3			Product Manager	30 Min	29-03-23	Video-call	Un-structured
4	Start-up B	Surviving	COO	48 Min	30-03-23	Video-call	Semi-structured
5	Start-up C	Successful	Head of HR and Operations	45 Min	27-04-23	Video-call	Semi-structured
6	Start-up D	Successful	CEO	38 Min	29-04-23	WhatsApp Call	Semi-structured
7	Start-up E	Failed	Ex-Employee	35 Min	30-04-23	WhatsApp Call	Semi-structured
8	Start-up F	Failed	Ex-Employee	40 Min	26-04-23	WhatsApp Call	Semi-structured
9.	E-commerce association	e-Commerce Association of Bangladesh (e-Cab)	Board Member	35 Min	12-03-23	WhatsApp Call	Un-structured

The guiding thread of the interview questions was how each start-up strives toward success. The questions made during the interviews summed up 8 and were divided into different sets, according to a specific purpose. (1) The first set was meant to identify the history and current face of the start-up in order to assure that they were in a scale-up process. (2) The second set of questions intended to identify challenges which the start-up had faced in the scaling-up process. (3) The third set of questions was meant to find out three elements: how the start-up empowers its employees, the process of supplier quality control activities, and performance tracking and monitoring. (4) And the last set of questions served to discover what types of activities gave to the start-up a margin of agility and exploration.

It is important to remark that none of the questions mentioned explicitly the idea of routines, however, the set of questions 2, 3 and 4 were conceived in such a way that the answers would lead us to chains of activities that we can consider as routines. Departing from the interview we tried to see how organisations change naturally, without introducing to them the concept of routines or change, but rather letting them detail their activities and from this, we aimed to extract the information that we needed for this study.

Finally, in a last stage, the obtained data was analysed and compared to the relevant literature in order to find an answer to the research problem, opening the corresponding discussion.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical issues were taken into account. Since the interviews were recorded, all participants were asked for their consent of being recorded. Furthermore, they were informed that their name and company's name would not be disclosed throughout the study for the sake of data protection and privacy rules. In addition, all the files related to the interviews and information on these start-ups will be deleted in the same of the completion of the study.

3.4 Limitations

As with any study, there are certain limitations associated with research.

Pentland, et al., (2009: 47) underlined, "It is difficult to observe even a single performance of an organisational routine from beginning to end". In other words, it is difficult to understand

in detail how routines are created and maintained because it requires a lot of time for observations. Therefore, one of the major constraints of this study was the timeframe, as we spent only two weeks conducting the interviews. Despite the strong desire to gain as many possible insights and information about start-up routines, there was the limitation of time and availability of suitable people for the interview. The challenge was that we needed to interview only the employees who are involved in the same task.

However, to improve these challenges the authors took measurements and used an abductive approach. In this approach, the conclusions drawn from empirical findings could be confirmed after being analysed. Therefore, we have used more than one method to validate the data: we conducted several interviews with the key board member of the e-commerce association of Bangladesh to validate some of the data patterns.

Furthermore, it was challenging for the ex-employees of the 2 failed start-ups (Start-ups E and F) to recall the routines and remember in detail the tasks that they carried out for the company.

Another limitation that we encountered during the interview was that we observed that one CEO directly monitored what the interviewed employee is answering. Unfortunately, we could not get another interview slot to double-check the data.

4. Empirical data

4.1 E-commerce start-ups in Bangladesh

A significant number of e-commerce start-up launches businesses every year. However, we could not find any exact statistics about the rate or number of businesses entering and exiting the business. To get a general overview of this fact, we contacted an e-commerce association in Bangladesh. We obtained then the dynamics of over 10 years of the e-commerce start-ups joining and leaving the e-commerce association (table 3). According to these data, an average of 62% of the e-commerce businesses continue their business, being also active in the association, while 38% quitted the business or became inactive in the association. Moreover out 1244 active members less than 10% start-ups able to scaleup their business.

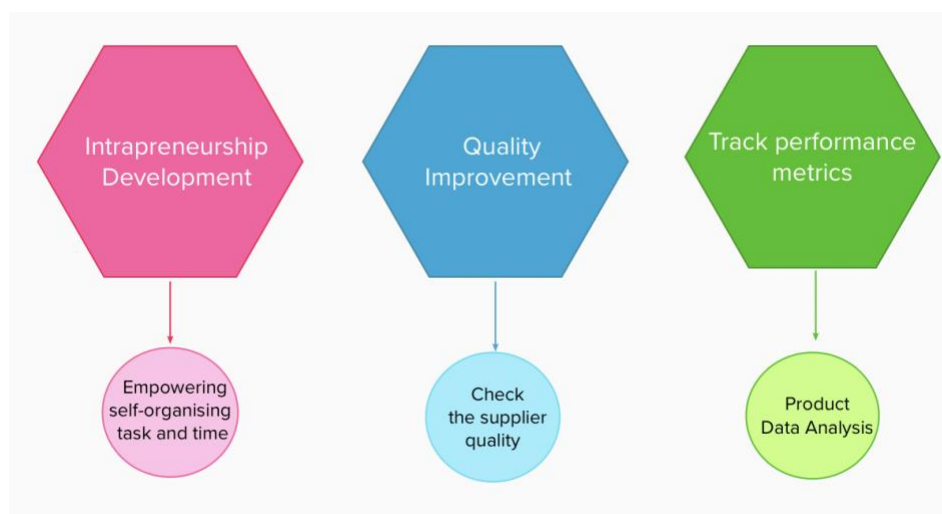
Table 3: The members' dynamics in an e-commerce association in Bangladesh

Year	Member ID	Total Member	Payment is performed (as of 2022)	Due Member
2014	0001 - 0053	53	33	20
2015	0054 - 0308	254	83	171
2016	0309 – 0539	230	70	159
2017	0540 - 0720	180	72	108
2018	0721 - 0853	132	63	69
2019	0854 - 1008	154	79	75
2020	1009 - 1414	405	286	119
2021	1415 - 1626	211	166	55
2022	1627 - 1905	278	278	0
2023	1906 - 2020	114	114	0
		2020	1244	776

4.2 The three types of routines used to present the data of this study

In order to present, describe and discuss the data collected by this research, we have conceived a classification consisting of three types of routines (figure 3). The aim of this classification was to homologate the scope with which each case of study was addressed, bearing in mind their purpose for the scale-up phase. Let us explain in this section what we mean by these types of routines.

Figure 3: The three types of routines



1. The routine “Empowering self-organisation of task and time”

Start-up entrepreneurs in Bangladesh are involved in multi-tasking jobs and their management style is centralised. This is one of the barriers that start-ups encounter to scale-up their business. Self-organisation tasks are managed and carried out by individuals or teams without external supervision. In such jobs, individuals or teams organise their work, decide what must be done, and choose the most effective strategy to accomplish the firm’s objectives. This working culture can increase the innovativeness, productivity, and motivation of employees. In addition, this can also foster employees’ ownership, creativity, and accountability which enable them to decentralise the start-up for facilitating growth. We will analyse this routine from the management perspective in order to see how this routine is used by different start-ups during their scale-up process.

2. The routine “Check the supplier quality”.

In Bangladesh the number of e-commerce start-ups is increasing day by day, however, a majority of the e-commerce have failed to sustain the business after a certain time. There are many reasons for failure, but poor and faulty product quality is one of the main factors. Checking supplier’s product quality on a regular basis is an important role for an e-commerce start-up because that ensures consistency and reliability of the products, reducing the risks of having defections or faulty products. We will analyse how e-commerce start-ups ensure the quality of their products. This routine can help improve overall customer satisfaction by ensuring lower return rates due to defects or quality.

3. The routine “Product Data Analysis”

In Bangladesh, most of the start-up entrepreneurs are not aware of the impact and usage of data analysis. This routine involves applying statistical and analytical methods and tools to examine the information about a particular product or a product line. We will analyse how a start-up tracks product data to get valuable insights about customer preferences, product performance, market trends, and other elements that affect a product's success.

4.3 Successful start-ups

4.3.1 Start-up C

Start-up C is one of most successful e-commerce start-ups in Bangladesh which is also known as the industry's innovator. The start-up influences changing Bangladesh's purchasing habits and is able to introduce new trends on online retail platforms.

Figure 4: Start-up C at a glance

Start-up C is one of the renowned e-commerce platforms that sell a wide range of products include electronics, mobile phones, home appliances, furniture, groceries, beauty and personal care products and much more. The company guarantees a quick, secure, and simple online shopping experience while offering a large selection of products from well-known Bangladeshi brands.

This well-known online retail platform was created in 2012 by a German investment company,

and Start-up C began operations in Bangladesh in 2013. Later, in May 2018, Start-up C was purchased by another significant online giant. Currently, the organisation has around 100.000 suppliers and a 75% of market share (figure 4).

In 2012, Start-up C started offering users Cash on Delivery which made them popular in the country. The customer pays for the product using the cash-on-delivery payment method, meaning that the payment is done when the product is delivered at the door. Customers who do not have a bank account or who are uncomfortable exposing their bank information online are frequently using this type of payment option.

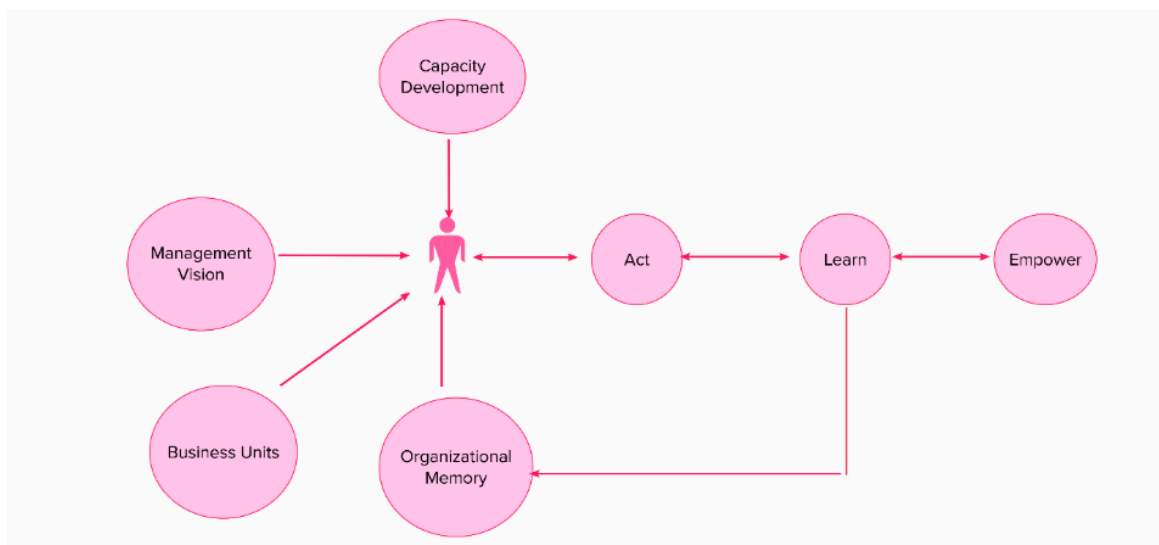
Number of Suppliers	100K
Current Revenue Growth	190%
Number of Local and International brands	55000
Market Share in e-commerce Bangladesh	75%
Commission Takes	5%
Total Employee	5000 +
Average Shipment time	3-7 days
Coverage	All over the country
Monthly App visit	5 million +

Routine 1: Empowering self-organisation of task and time in Start-up C

Start-up C has a strong vision of empowering employees and transform them to self-organisation of task and time. The organisation started with only 5 employees in 2013. Currently, the organisation has more than 945 full-time employees and 4065 part-time employees. The management's ultimate objective is to create proactive, self-driven employees who would lead the company and drive it forward. To achieve this objective the start-up has designed a variety of capacity development training programs.

When a supervisor or management team identify any skills gap, they immediately inform the training department to conduct particular training to improve the capacity of that employee or team. In the early-stage Start-up C did not have this routine. They implemented it when they started scaling-up and since then, they are practicing it. This routine highly benefited the company in grow (including in terms of personnel) and scale-up. Figure 5 explains how Start-up C empowers its employees.

Figure 5: Empowering process of self-organisation of task and time in Start-up C



How Start-up C develops the process of empowerment of self-organisation of task and time:

1. The management has a strong vision to empower employees and they make it part of their organisational culture. So, the management is part of the process as they monitor and observe the number of employees that is being empowered.
2. Start-up C has 10 different departments in the company:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| i. Technology Department | vi. Human Resource Department |
| ii. Commercial Department | vii. Corporate Affairs |
| iii. Accounts and Finance Department | viii. Strategy and Planning |
| iv. Traffic operation Department | ix. Operation Department |
| v. Marketing Department | x. Data Analysis Department |

Each of the department has a standard operating procedure (SOP) and based on that, the department operates its activities. When a supervisor finds potential employees who need to develop their skills or have a skill gap, the supervisor forwards this information to the capacity development department for skill development training.

3. Start-up C organises virtual capacity development training through internal LMS (Learning Management System) software. Capacity development department develops skill development courses, assigned to the employee based on need assessment, monitored the learning progress, and provides a certificate after completion of the course.

4. In addition, capacity development team organises a variety of on premises skill development training and brings industry experts from the national and international levels. The training duration varies according to the necessities. After the training, there is an assessment test to identify the outcome of the training.

5. Finally, the supervisor assigns tasks to the employees in order to analyse the changes in the performance of those employees. If the employees, make any mistakes they extract the lessons from this situation and therefore learn how to act in a particular situation.

Routine 2: Check the supplier quality in Start-up C

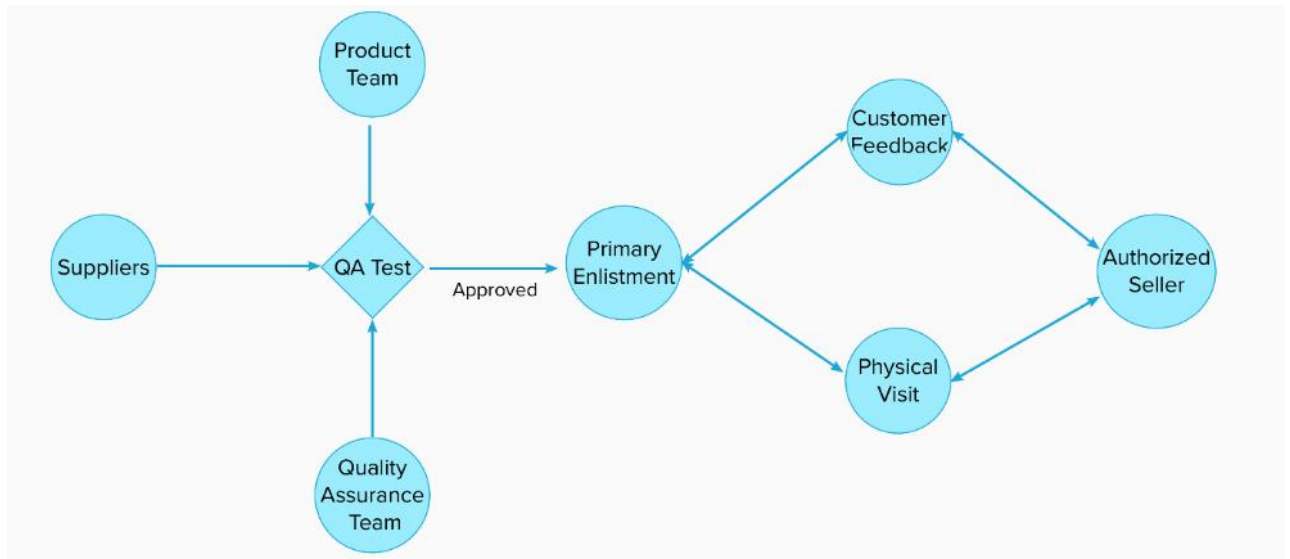
Start-up C works as a trustee between sellers and customers (a marketplace model) as compared to purchasing goods and then selling them to customers (a retail model). In the e-commerce portal of Start-up C, thousands of sellers post their goods. So, it is very important to check and assure the supplier product quality in the context of Bangladesh's e-commerce market. Start-up C uses the following procedure to routinely assess the supplier's product quality.

How Start-up C checks suppliers:

1. Start-up C has a web portal for the suppliers. Suppliers can create an account with just a phone number.

2. Start-up C sends an OTP (one time password) to the supplier given phone number to verify the contact number.
3. Suppliers need to complete the Profile general information such as (store name, address details, National ID card number & Bank Information, and list of products they want sell in the e-commerce platform.

Figure 6: The supplier's quality checking process in Start-up C



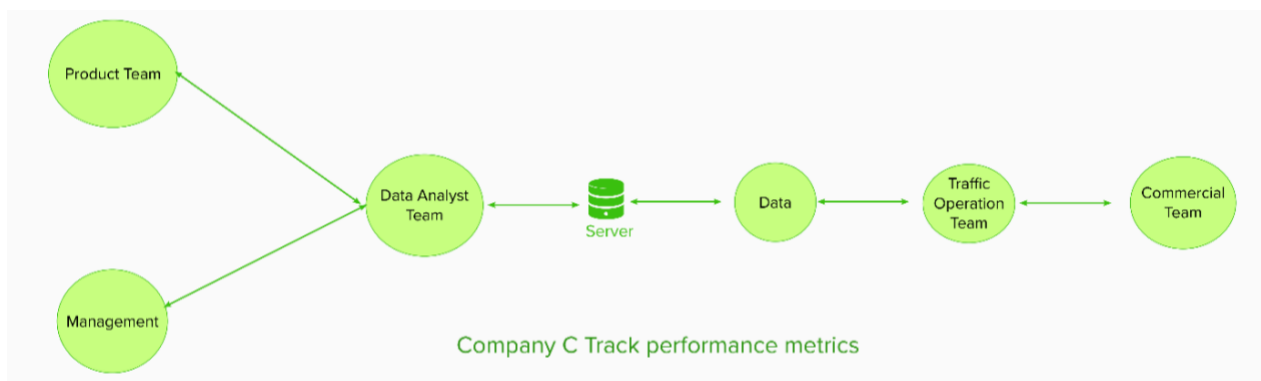
4. One employee from Start-up C checks the supplier profile information: performs an online verification of the company in general; checks if the supplier has everything in order on the comply the rules and regulation. Once the verification is done, the employee sends notification (approval or denial) to the supplier request.
5. In the case the profile is accepted, Start-up C sends two personnel to performs a physical visit to the supplier store. Start-up C has offices in 64 districts of Bangladesh so from the nearest district office two employees visit the supplier's store. At this verification stage, they check the products and their quality. They also verify the address, company documentation, years of experience and the goodwill of the supplier.
6. After the physical visit assigned personnel sends report to the commercial department stating their findings. Finally commercial team approves or denies the authorised seller request.

7. In case the supplier request is finally approved, then the supplier receive authorised seller certificate from the Start-up C. And the enlisted in the e-commerce portal as authorised supplier.
8. Start-up C also monitor the supplier's performance by reviewing customers feedback and comments. This entire process is depicted in the figure 6.

Routine 3: Product Data Analysis in Start-up C

Start-up C has a very robust enterprise resource planning software (ERP) and all the data are stored in the ERP software database. Start-up C has two departments, which are unique compared with other e-commerce start-ups in Bangladesh, namely the Data Analysis team and Traffic Operation team. The business analyst team extracts the data by running some queries in the database, then they structured the data and prepare visualisation and then share it with the relevant stakeholders whenever it is required. In contrast, the Traffic operation team observes real-time data of current sales tractions and compares it with past data (last week/last month) and recommends commercial department change product prices, update product information or images, or give a discount to increase or maintain sales growth. Both the commercial team and product team works under the commercial department, but both teams have different goals and objective. The product team is in charge of managing the product catalogue, content development, and improving user experience, while the commercial team concentrates on sales, partnerships, and revenue. Figure 7 explains how the process of tracking performance metrics of Start-up C is performed.

Figure 7: The product performance tracking in Start-up C



We have a unique traffic operation team; their responsibility is to analyse which product sales are dropping and which product sells is increasing. For example, the Traffic operation team identified that Computer Mouse sales are dropping during the last 3 months. Therefore, they shared the information with product team. The product team uploaded new high-resolution images and updated the product description. As a result, this process helped to increase the sales of Computer Mouse. (Head of HR and Operations, Start-up C)

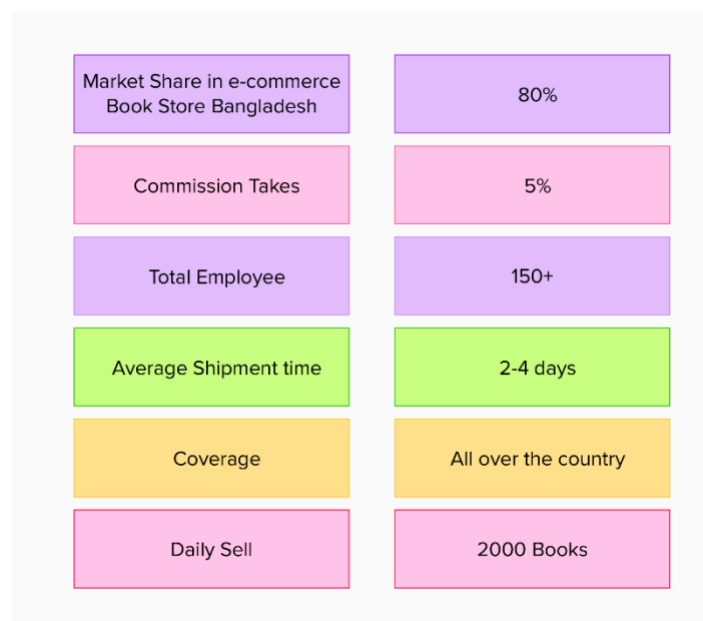
How Start-up C tracks the product performance metrics:

1. Management team and commercial team ask product performance and sales reports to the data analytics team on regular basis. Start-up C data analysis team prepared report based on the requirement by extracting data from the database and use specialised analytics tools to prepare sales, revenue, and performance report.
2. Traffic operation team monitor real time traffic, clicks, and conversions using different analytics tool.
3. The traffic operation team is responsible for analysing and tracking the sales performance. They share the data to the commercial team to take further action to increase the sales traction.

4.3.2 Start-up D

Start-up D is one of the most famous online Book stores in Bangladesh with a variety of books, including novels, fiction, non-fiction, and academic textbooks. This e-commerce platform was established in 2012 and since then has expanded. Currently, it ranks among the top e-commerce sites in the country. Start-up D emphasises customer satisfaction and offers reliable delivery services,

Figure 8: Start-up D at a glance



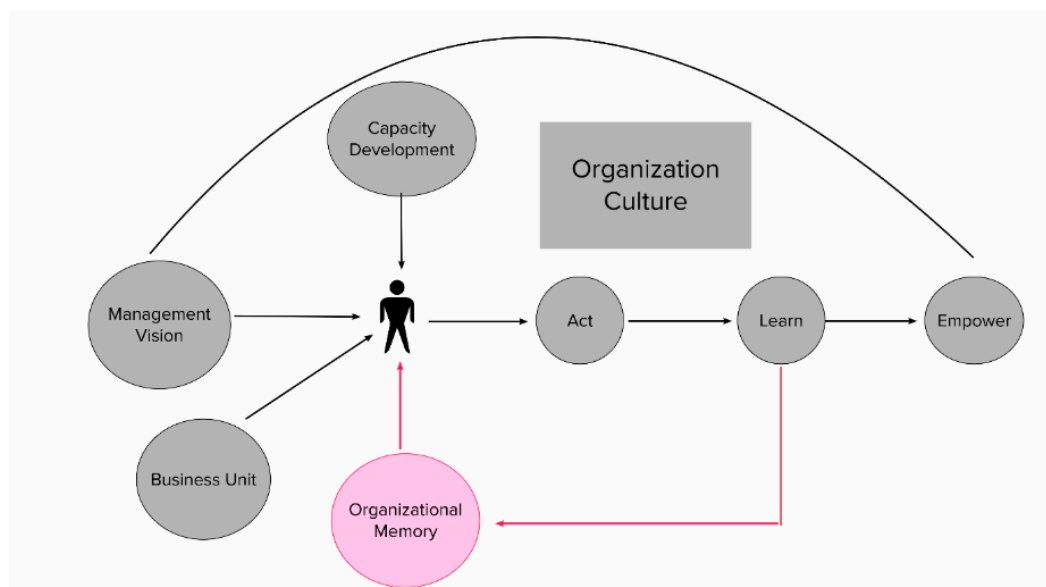
guaranteeing that books are delivered on time to clients' doorsteps. Start-up D has established itself as a reliable resource for book lovers in Bangladesh.

Currently, the Start-up D has more than 0.2 million books in their library, but it started with only 100 books. With 150 people, daily book sales range from 1500 to 2000 pieces (figure 8).

Routine 1: How Start-up D develops the process of empowerment of self-organisation of task and time

1. Start-up D has developed a culture where team members are encouraged to take responsibility for their work and exercise independent judgment. Start-up D adopted this culture by establishing and communicating clear goals and rules to the team members, as well as by empowering team members to take charge of their actions within their respective views. This is only possible because of management's vision of empowerment.

Figure 9: Empowering process of self-organisation of task and time in Start-up D



2. Start-up D runs a variety of training initiatives to give team members the know-how and teach them the abilities they require to be successful in their positions. Additionally, Start-up D arranges mentorship from top management, allowing staff to receive appropriate

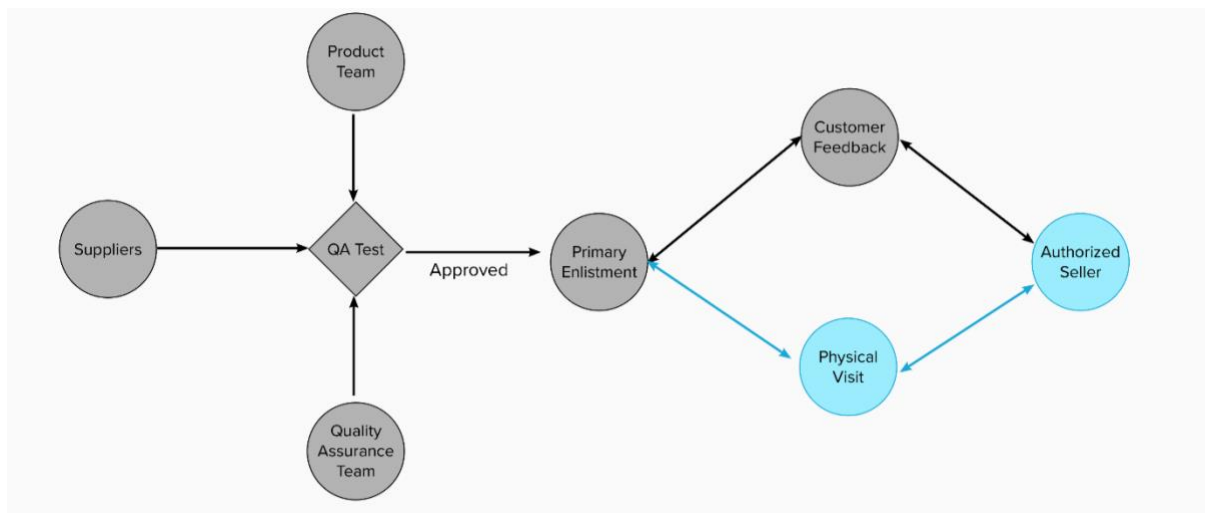
direction, support, and advice. This enables staff members to overcome difficulties, take better decisions and gain knowledge from others' experiences.

3. Afterwards, the tasks are assigned to the employees and management checks how the employees perform and learn from their mistakes. Figure 9 depicts this entire process of organising the empowerment of self-organisation of tasks and time of the employees; the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of Start-up D in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

Routine 2: How Start-up D checks suppliers

Initially, start-up D started the business as an e-commerce platform for selling books. As a part of the scaling-up process, the organisation is now selling electronic products, gift items, and office accessories. Figure 10 depicts this entire process of supplier checking; the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of Start-up D in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

Figure 10: The supplier's quality checking process in Start-up D



The process can be described as follows:

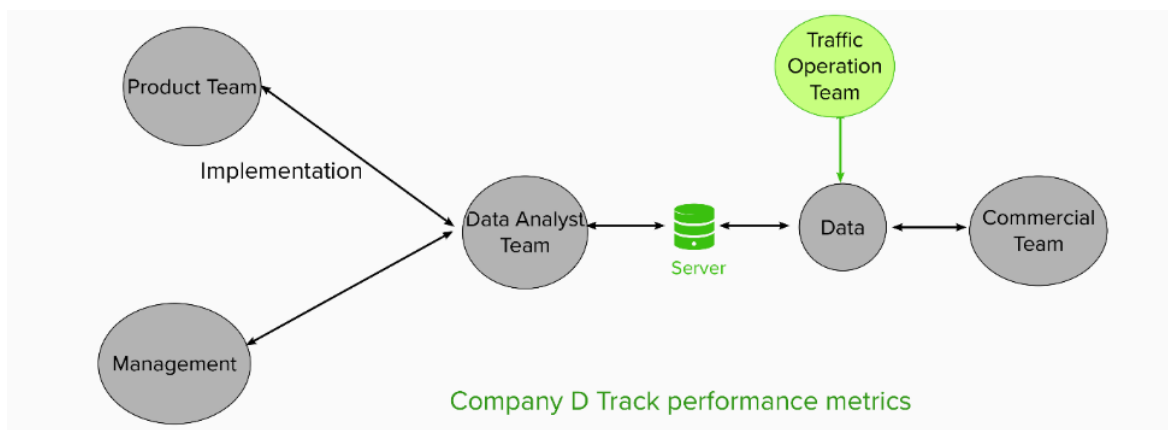
1. Company D has a web portal for suppliers. Suppliers can directly sign-up the form to express their interest to sell the product on the platform.

2. Quality Assurance and Product teams verify the information. Afterward, if the start-up approves the expression of interest, then it sends to the supplier a contract to sign.
3. If the supplier agrees with the terms and condition mentioned in the contract, then they signed the contract and sends it back to Start-up D.
4. Start-up D signs the contract and then enlists the supplier's product in the e-commerce portal.
5. The Start-up D categorise the supplier according to the reviews from the customer feedbacks.

Routine 3: How start-up D conduct Product Data Analysis

Start-up D has a dedicated data analysis team to check the sales, marketing, website analytics, and customer feedback data. The product team requests data and analytics form the data analysis team on a weekly basis. The management monitors these data alongside the product team, commercial, and data analysis teams. The metrics such as the volume of books sold, revenue earned, and profit margins are included in this analysis. Figure 11 is detailing how the product data analysis is taking place; the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of Start-up D in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

Figure 11: The product performance tracking in Start-up D



We keep track of reader reviews, ratings, and comments to get customer feedback. This gives us insightful information about the book content, service experience, and delivery and points out places where we can make improvements. We also observe how a particular book

performs in terms of reaching the customer and its interaction on social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Lastly, we track marketing efforts' effectiveness by using Facebook Ads Manager and Google AdWords. (CEO, Start-up D)

4.4 Surviving start-ups

4.4.1 Start-up A

Start-up A is an e-commerce platform for organic, nutritious, and safe food in the capital city of Bangladesh, Dhaka. Currently they have more than 30 employees and they been working on a big vision: stopping food adulteration and offer safe food to urban citizens.

According to The Economist, Bangladesh is ranked 80th out of 113 nations for food safety and quality (Economist Impact, n.d.). The main causes of the Bangladeshi bad performance on the worldwide index are food adulteration and the lack of food diversification. The economy and the general population are seriously harmed by this, mainly in terms of cancer disease. According to a recent estimate from the World Health Organisation (WHO), there are more than 1.5 million cancer sufferers in the nation (Habib and Molla, 2022).

Each year, 300 thousand people are diagnosed with cancer - 50% of them cannot be cured. And there are 2 million kidney sufferers. According to experts, the primary cause of cancer and kidney disease is food adulteration. (CEO, Start-up A)

Routine 1: Empowering self-organisation of task and time in Start-up A

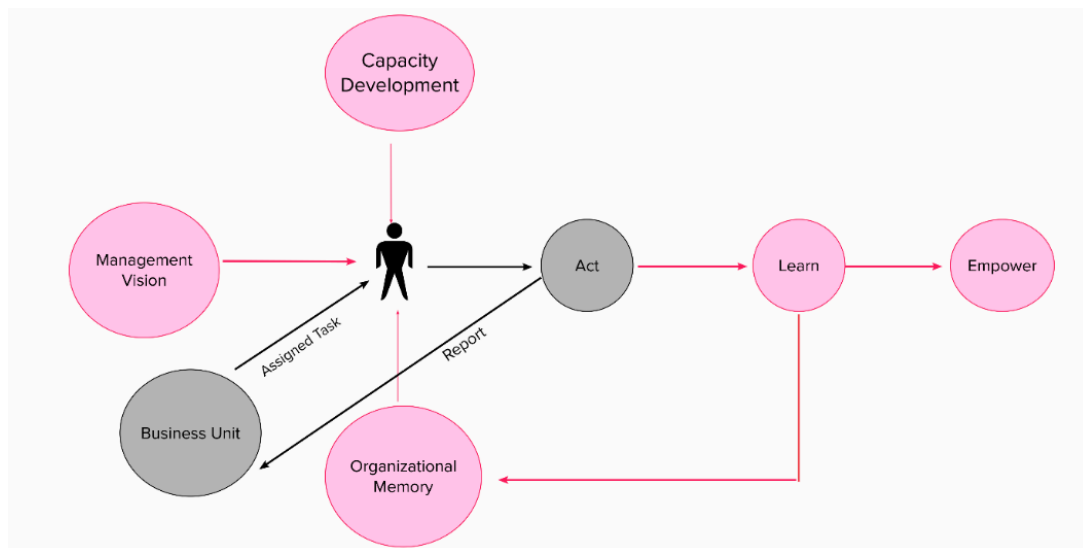
The CEO of start-up A has a very strong educational and professional background. He was an ex-government employee and retired intentionally earlier, at the age of 40. That is why his leadership technique is a bit autocratic. He commands his team to implement the tasks rather than helping them in self-organisation of their task and time. Within the company, there is only one person whom he gave authority to take decisions, but that person is his very close family friend.

So, the decisions are coming centrally from the CEO and the employees have to perform their duties based on the given task. The company conducts a training session for new employees but that is very limited.

We organise training sessions to share the company's vision, rules, and working process. Moreover, we have a small book library in the office, and I recommend my colleagues to read different self-help and business tactics books which I believe help my teammates to improve their capacity and thinking process. (CEO, Start-up A)

There is a bad practice of humiliating employees if they are not able to perform the job accurately. Due to this reason, many employees switch jobs within three to six months. The company is not providing adequate learning opportunities and they do not empower employees to take decisions on their own. That is why the key personnel in the organisation is very limited and it is hard to create a new successor in the organisation. Figure 12 is depicting the empowering process; the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of Start-up A in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

Figure 12: Empowering process of self-organisation of task and time in Start-up A



Routine 2: Check the supplier quality in Start-up A

Start-up A has diverse suppliers who produced different organic food items from rural areas of Bangladesh and send them to the company as per the requirement. Currently, they have more than 100 producers across the country who deliver the products to the company. Start-up A

developed and maintained a database of different suppliers of different food items across the country. So, when a new product idea has been generated internally or they got a requirement from a client then they sent the product specification to the prospective suppliers from the database and get a sample with a product quotation.

We have internal idea generation meetings once a week and we have a designated product team for that. It consists of three members; they propose a new product idea which is presented to a meeting with the full team. Then, we discuss and debate that idea. If it is approved by the management then we send it to our existing suppliers asking whether they can produce the new product. If the supplier is unable to supply the product, we search for a new supplier which is able to develop that specific product. (COO, Start-up A)

After getting the sample of the product, the employees taste it and if they are satisfied with the food taste, pricing, and terms then Start-up A makes a deal with the supplier. The next step is that the product team creates a labelling of the product (picture 1 and 2) and sends it to the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) for approval. If BSTI approves the product, then Start-up A lists it on the portal with the specifications, some images and the price.

Picture 1: New product sample (source: Start-up A)



Picture 2: Photo-shot of the product before listing on the website (source: Start-up A)



Example 1: Sweet Curd is one of the most popular food products in Bangladesh. The product has a very high demand in Dhaka city and people want mostly the one produced in Bogura district, as it has unique taste and creamy texture. But Bogura is almost 150 km away from Dhaka city that is why urban people cannot have the original Sweet Curd from Bogura, the one they can only get is the one locally produced but it is not as tasty as the Bogura one.

Bogura is very popular for Sweet Curd. But all the producers are not maintaining proper hygiene and adequate ingredients. We visited around 20 producers to inspect their kitchens and analyse the process, see what ingredients they use, and inspect the overall quality. We also investigate if they then scale-up the production if they get a large number of orders and how they can deliver the product maintaining the appropriate temperature and hygiene. Finally, we compare the product pricing and then select a vendor for Sweet Curd.

(CEO, Start-up A)

Example 2: Honey from Sundarban (the largest mangrove forest in the world) is very popular in Dhaka city. People of all ages use it not only as food but also as medicine.

We did not source the honey directly from Sundarban as it is in a very remote area. And due to the complicated and risky honey-gathering process, it is difficult for us to go and see the supplier process. We have a good supplier who is collecting organic honey and supply in Dhaka for more than 10 years. We took some samples and agreed with the price which satisfied our expectations and then we listed it as our product. (CEO, Start-up A)

Reactive Quality assurance Process

Our company's main motive is to provide organic and fresh food without any toxic chemicals. So, our quality assurance team's main responsibility is to guarantee product quality and its attributes to fulfil customer expectations.

(CEO, Start-up A).

Picture 3: Quality checking process
(source: Start-up A)

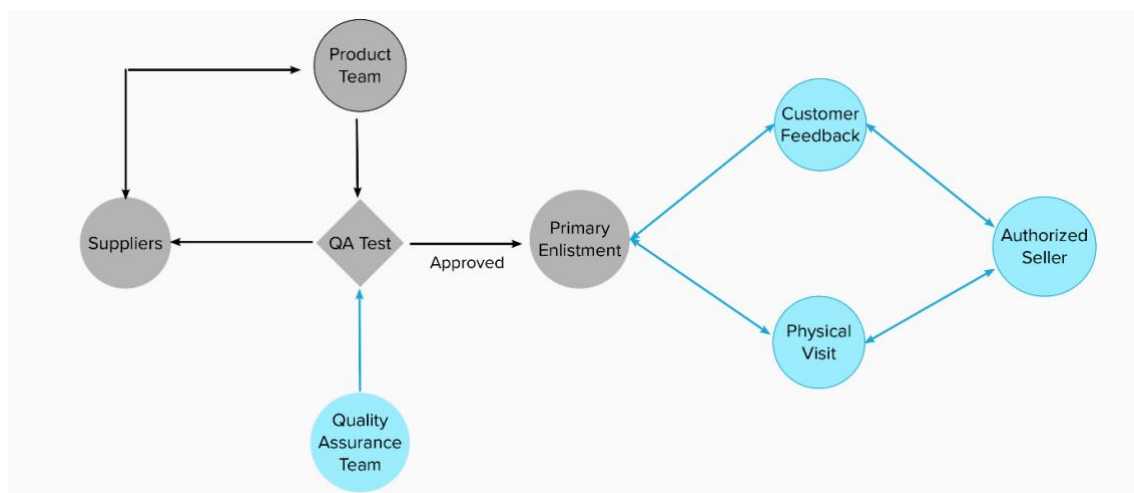


Picture 4: Quality checking by multiple team members (source: Start-up A)



Despite the CEO's strong commitment towards quality assurance hence we have found the company is quite rigid in the proactive quality assurance process (spontaneous) rather they are doing a reactive quality assurance process (based on the complains). When the company received the products from suppliers, the product and quality assurance team checked the products as per the requirements. Based on the product items they store and preserve foods in different ways and temperature. If they found any mismatch in taste or specific requirements, then they return the product to the respective suppliers. This process is very difficult if the company wants to scale up the business. Figure 13 is depicting the empowering process; the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of Start-up A in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

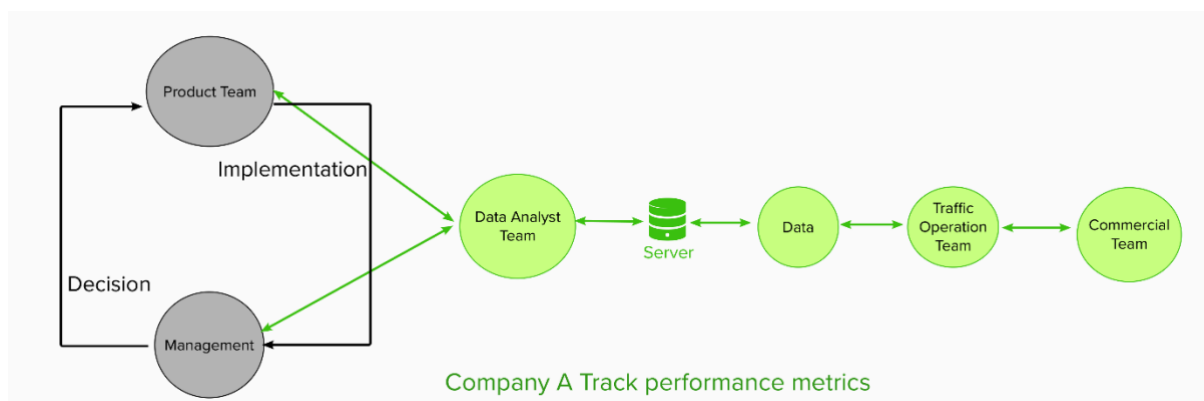
Figure 13: The supplier's quality checking process in Start-up A



Routine 3: How start-up A conducts Product Data Analysis

Start-up A has faced plenty of challenges in implementing their web portal. When the company was in the very early stage, they contracted a freelancer to build an e-commerce platform. However, within a few months, the freelancer stopped working with the company due to a conflict with the start-up. The company did not able to utilise the existing code base, rather they onboarded another freelancing team to develop the site from scratch again. It took three months to complete the site, but the management was not fully satisfied with the performance of the e-commerce portal as there were many bugs in the system. The freelancing team was very young, and they do not have adequate project experience, that is why the project implementation cost was very cheap. Start-up A was not intended to work with a professional software company nor to board dedicated software engineers in the company to develop the e-commerce portal because they want a less expensive solution and maintenance. Despite this fact, their system is very amateur and built with a simple CMS (Content Management System) platform which does not allow the management to see details data analytics or performance metrics of a product or a product line. They track the sales and order information manually and if the sales of a particular product increase, they promote that product more and increase more visibility on social media to get more orders. And if a product order decreases, they stop the promotion of the product and try a new product to post and boost on Facebook. All these decisions are taken by the CEO and implemented by the product team. Figure 14 is depicting the empowering process; the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of Start-up A in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

Figure 14: The product performance tracking in Start-up A



4.4.2 Start-up B

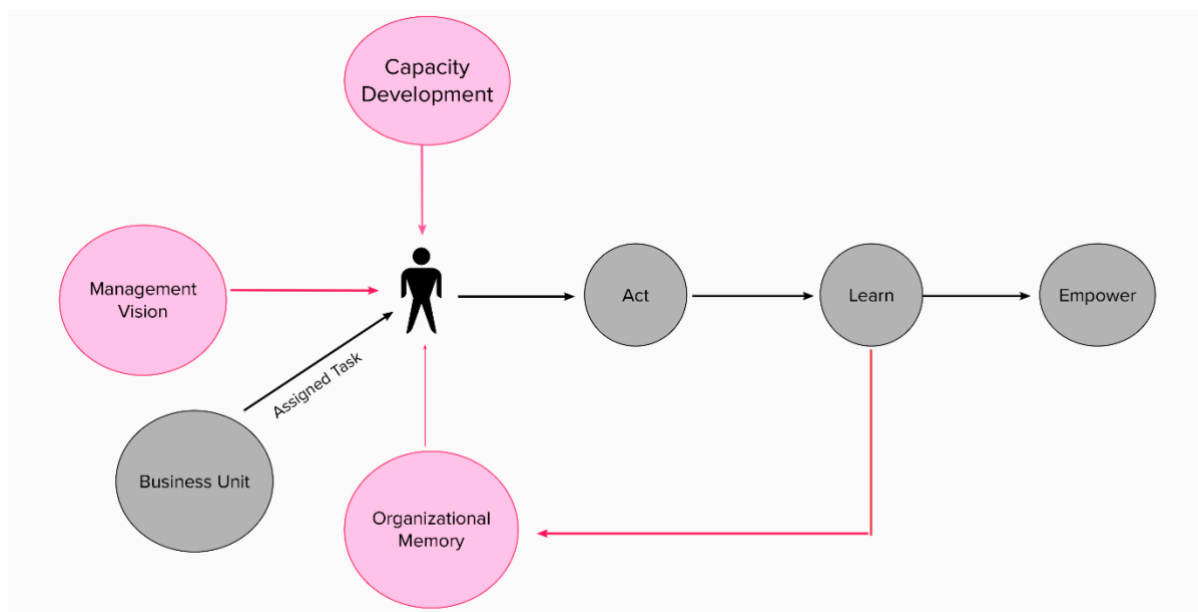
Start-up B is a fastest-growing online marketplace in Bangladesh that links travellers with regional craftspeople in developing countries, enabling them to get unique, genuine handmade goods right from the source. The platform tries to encourage ethical and responsible tourism while giving these artists sustainable economic options. Customers can explore and buy items from many different categories, such as electronics, accessories, home decor, and fashion.

Routine 1: How Start-up B develops the process of empowerment of self-organisation of task and time

Although start-up B has a small team, they also do not have any formal capacity development program where they can improve the skills of their employees. Furthermore, Start-up B is not in a position to hire skilful or experienced resources due to their financial limitations therefore they tried to empower employees and allow them to perform freely and learn for the act.

When new employees join the company, they usually have a couple of sessions with internal department team leaders who share a book on instructions about the procedure and SOPs of their work. (COO, Start-up B)

Figure 15: Empowering process of self-organisation of task and time in Start-up B

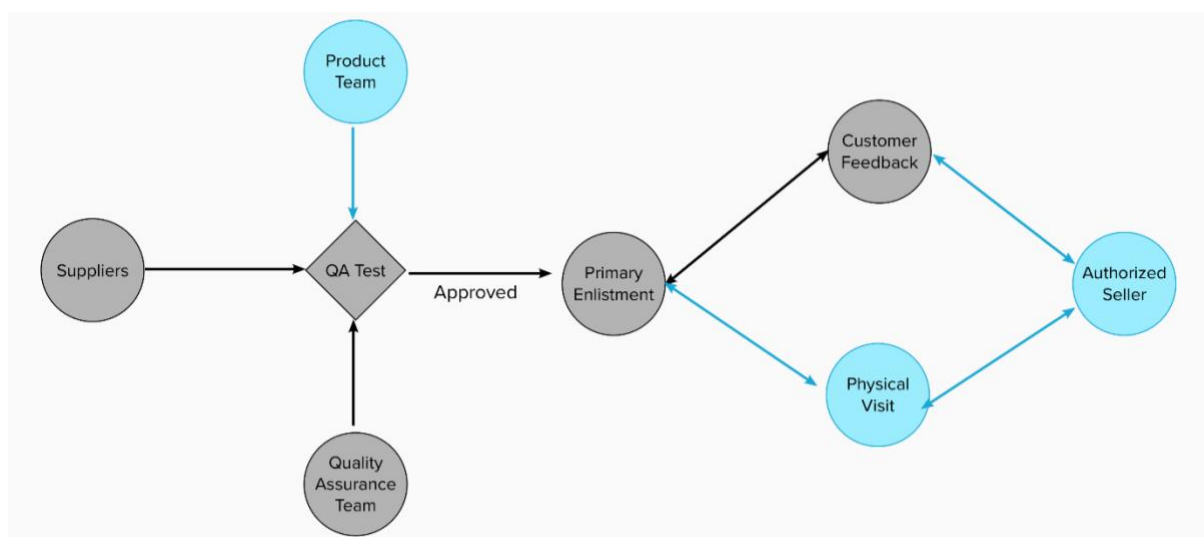


When a business unit assigned a new task to an employee, the team leader gives directions on how to complete the task and what are the ways to perform the task. Then, to perform the task the employee acts based on direction, personal learning, and experience. Top management also keeps in the loop of seeing the progress and achievements of the employee. Figure 15 is depicting the empowering process; the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of Start-up B in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

Routine 2: How Start-up B checks suppliers

1. Start-up B is highly dependent on the supplier that is known as their traveller who travels across the globe, makes purchases and then delivers the products to the customer. When a traveller plans a trip (to any destination), he or she registers in the start-up B e-commerce portal. The quality team of start-up B checks the profile and personal details of the traveller and then, based on that information, Start-up B rejects or approved the traveller in the system.
2. In case of approval, during his or her trip, the traveller may get any customer order of certain products from the destination where the traveller is, then the system connects the traveller with the customer. If both parties agree on the product and its pricing, then the customer need to pay the amount through start-up B's e-commerce portal. After the payment confirmation, the traveller buys the requested product and brings it back to Bangladesh in his personal luggage.

Figure 16: The supplier's quality checking process in Start-up B

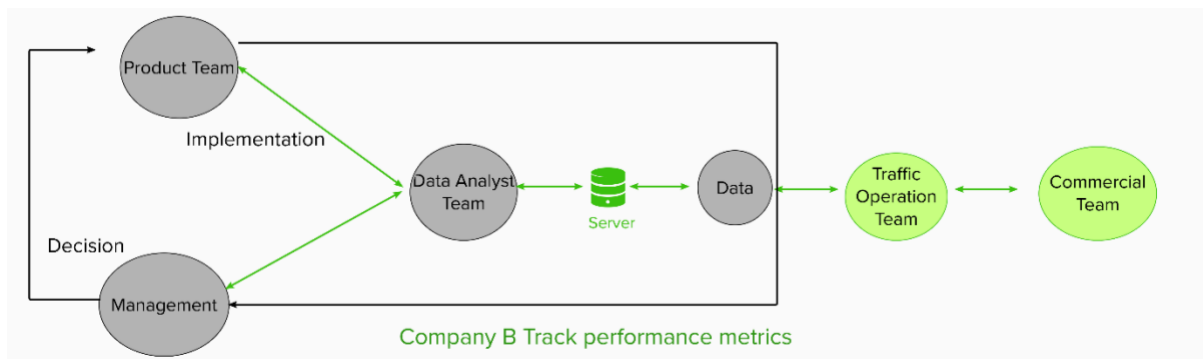


3. After receiving the product, the customer gives a review of the traveller. Based on the customer's reviews, Start-up B categorises the supplier. Figure 16 is depicting the supplier's quality checking process; the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of Start-up B in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

Routine 3: How start-up C conducts Product Data Analysis

Start-up B has a good technical and data analysis team who checks the website traffic and identifies which products are getting more popular and from which country. Based on their data previous recordings, they identified that most of the people prefer electronics products from the U.S.A. market because of the lower cost in comparison with other markets. On a weekly basis, the management team queries various data to the product team. The product team and data analysis team extract that data from the server and share it with the management team. Figure 17 is depicting the product performance tracking process; the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of Start-up B in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

Figure 17: The product performance tracking in Start-up B



4.5 Failed start-ups

4.5.1 Start-up E

Figure 18: Start-up E at a Glance

Current Market Share in e-commerce Industry	0%
In 2015 Web Traffic	Top 5
In 2015 users	4 Million +
Total Employee	150+
Coverage	All over the country

Start-up E is one of the widespread names in the field of e-commerce in Bangladesh. Start-up E bought by the Norwegian telecommunication firm Telenor in 2010, quickly reached 4 million users (figure 18). Start-up E was doing remarkably well, and the company ranked fifth by Alexa ranking, being a top shopping website in Bangladesh. Start-up E received the Best Usage of Mobile for

Social & Economic Development Award at the GSM World Mobile Awards Barcelona 2008 and the Accenture Economic Development Award 2007 respectively. A few years later the company was rebranded to make a stronger connection with the Bangla word. Start-up E operated from 2012 to 2018. Users of Start-up E had access to a huge selection of goods, including home articles, cars, real estate, and gadgets. The platform was free to use, and its revenue came from advertisements.

However, despite being the country's top marketplace, the start-up experienced severe challenges that lead to an overnight shutdown, namely operational difficulties, including problems with shipping and customer support. The Start-up E case marked an awful tragedy in the history of Bangladesh's e-commerce industry. Despite having a great track record, adequate financial resources, massive infrastructure, and a competent team, Start-up E was forced to quit the business.

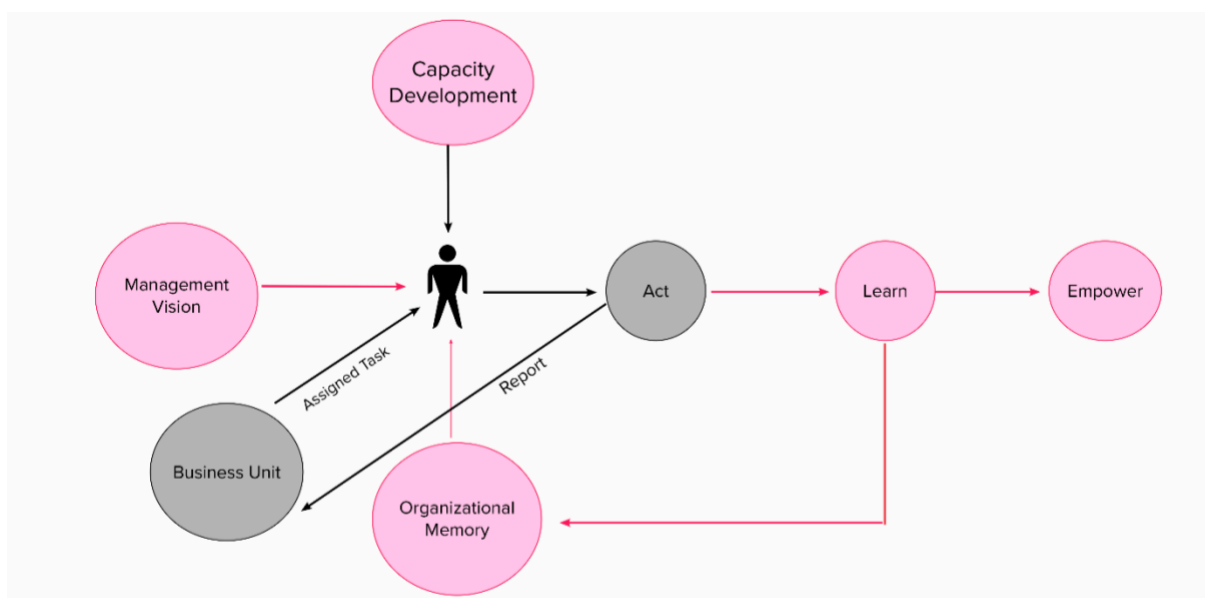
Routine 1: How Start-up E develops the process of empowerment of self-organisation of task and time

Interviewing an ex-employee from Start-up E it seems that Start-up E did not have any employee empowerment actions. They hired expensive human resources from different companies. The bureaucracy in the start-up E was visible, top managers directly instructed middle managers and middle managers assigned tasks to the executives. This created a lot of

internal conflict among team members which creates problems for the executives to implement the given task.

The start-up had a very bureaucratic organisation process. Most of the decisions came from the top management. The organisational culture was not allowing the middle and lower employees in the decision-making process. Moreover, start-up E did not have any successor development program to develop employees for the future, the start-up just followed an hiring and firing management style. (Ex-Employee, Start-up E)

Figure 19: Empowering process of self-organisation task and time in Start-up E



In Figure 19, the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of Start-up E in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

Routine 2: How Start-up E checks suppliers

Start-up E is a marketplace where anyone can upload products. So, quality assurance factor is a very important factor. However, Start-up E completely failed in maintaining standard quality.

I used to check the quality of more than a thousand advertisement quality each day. I had to check the user's name, location, account type, advertisement title, description of the product, product category, price, and image and after that I approved the advertisement. (Ex-

Employee of Start-up E)

In most of the advertisements, publishers made spelling mistakes in the product name and mistakenly added the item in the wrong category. Moreover, publishers incorrectly add the same product more than one time, hence the product appears double in the list. Therefore, most of the time the quality assurance team wasted checking the spelling of the product name, category, and duplication of product items. At the same time, many fraudulent publishers posted stolen and defective products by using this e-commerce portal, however those advertisements were approved by the quality assurance team. It was very difficult for the quality assurance team to detect this fraudulence without applying a multiple authentication method. As a result, many customers faced troubles and the Start-up E failed to solve the issues which, in turn, created a bad image in the customer's mind.

Figure 20: The supplier's quality checking process in Start-up E

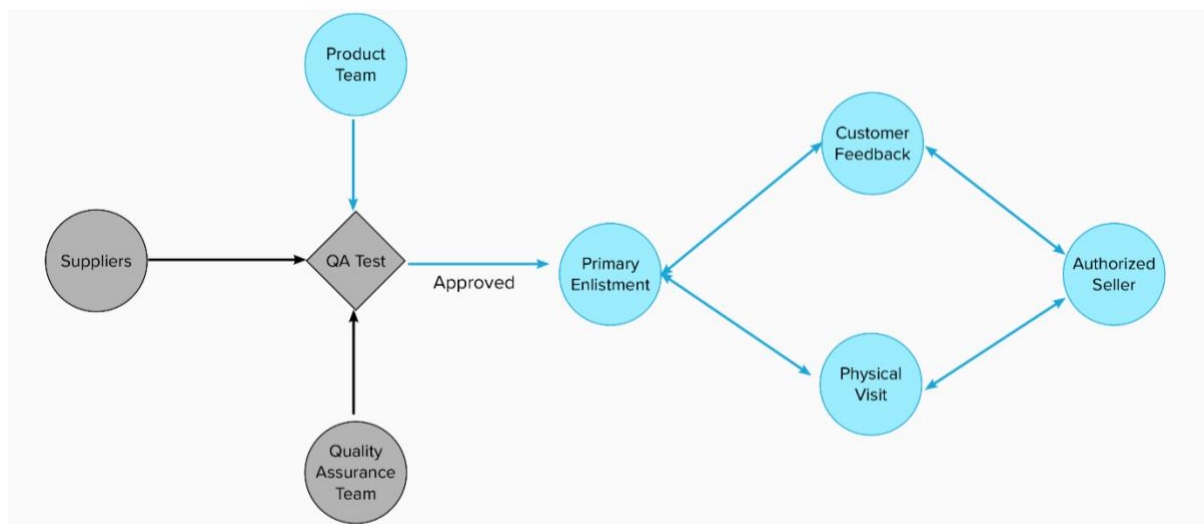
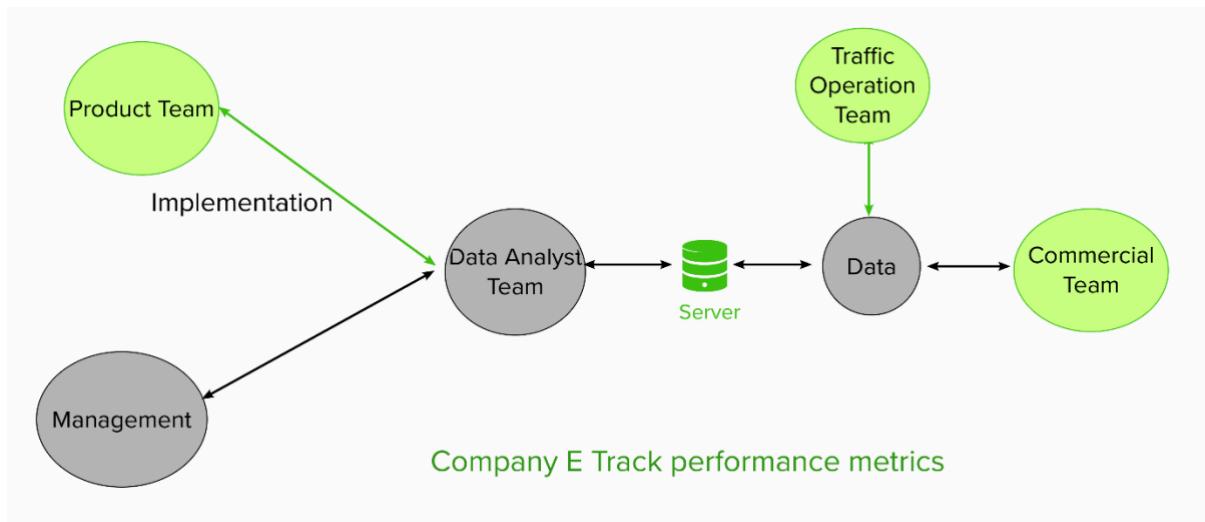


Figure 20 The back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of Start-up E in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

Routine 3: How start-up E conduct Product Data Analysis

Start-up E had a data analysis team, but they mainly focused on web traffic and on the way how the marketing activities bring new clients to the e-commerce platform. But they did not track the product performance as they did not have any tool to identify fraudulence and duplicated products.

Figure 21: The product performance tracking in Start-up E



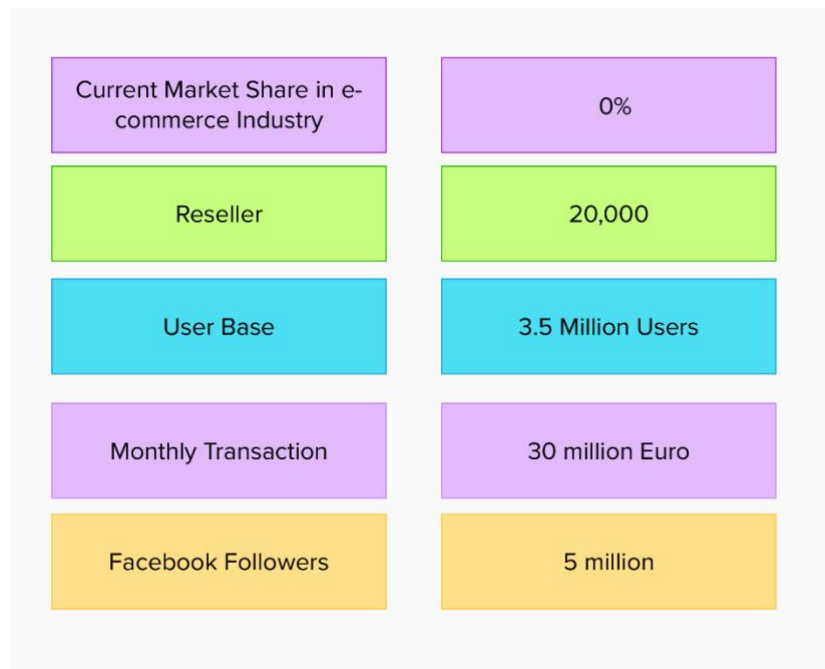
As a result, the product team had no idea about the product or service metrics. Only the management team knew how many users are landing on the page on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis; how long they are staying in the e-commerce portal; from which region they are coming; and what are their age and gender. Figure 21 depicts this process. The back circle and black arrow in the figure represent the actual workflow of Start-up E in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

4.5.2 Start-up F

Start-up F started its business in 2018 with an aggressive marketing strategy. The start-up offered gifts when a new customer registered on their e-commerce platform. Most interestingly, the company offered also very generous cashback to its customers. Fanciful offers and discounts for expensive products like motorbikes, electronics, and appliances increased customer attention very quickly. All these incentives turned Start-up F into an immediate preference in customer's mind.

Figure 22: Startup-F at a glance

According to Start-up F, they had over 3.5 million (or as Bangladeshi say 35 lakh) registered customers. Its monthly product transactions amounted to Tk 3 billion (30 million euros). It typically receives roughly Tk 1 million (10 million euros) in orders per month (figure 22). In addition, 25,000 more retail



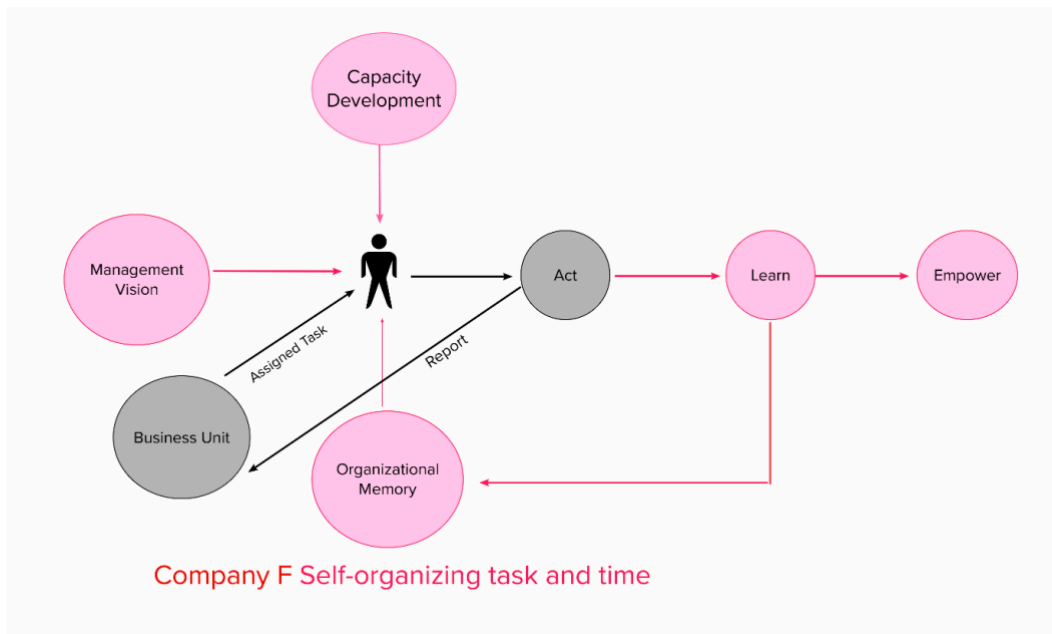
businesses joined Start-up F, getting a commission on the sales of around 4000 different product types. Everything seemed like a success story of e-commerce penetration in a highly promising area. So, in a short period of time (24 months), Start-up F developed its businesses and served a significant online customer base.

However, the start-up was unable to keep its promise of service, which compromised its clients and suppliers. Every time they were unable to deliver the products on time, they began to give an e-balance rather than a refund, so they failed to adequately engage the clients' needs. They also provided false information for the products, accounting information, and finally, the High Court of Bangladesh shut down Start-up F due to numerous compliance factors and fraud-related activity.

Routine 1: How Start-up F develops the process of empowerment of self-organisation of task and time

Start-up F follows the same workflow as start-up E. Within the very first two years of inception of the business, Start-up F started scaling the business. The start-up begins with 15 employees in 2018 and quickly reach 1500+ employees in 2020 so they didn't get time to structure the full organisation process.

Figure 23: Empowering process of self-organisation of task and time in Start-up F



Most of the start-ups did not go for such a fast-scaling process but start-up F was completely exceptional. The start-up had good financial backup, that is why they hired competent employees offering them high salaries, which was sometimes almost doubled comparing with similar offers. (Ex-employee, Start-up F)

Business unit directly assigned task to the employees and there was no capacity development or employee empowerment facility. As a result, junior and mid-level managers did not find opportunities to grow in the organisation.

The start-up did not develop their employees, rather they push to work always in firefighting mode. So, the employee retention rate was low due bad internal culture.

(Ex-employee, Start-up F)

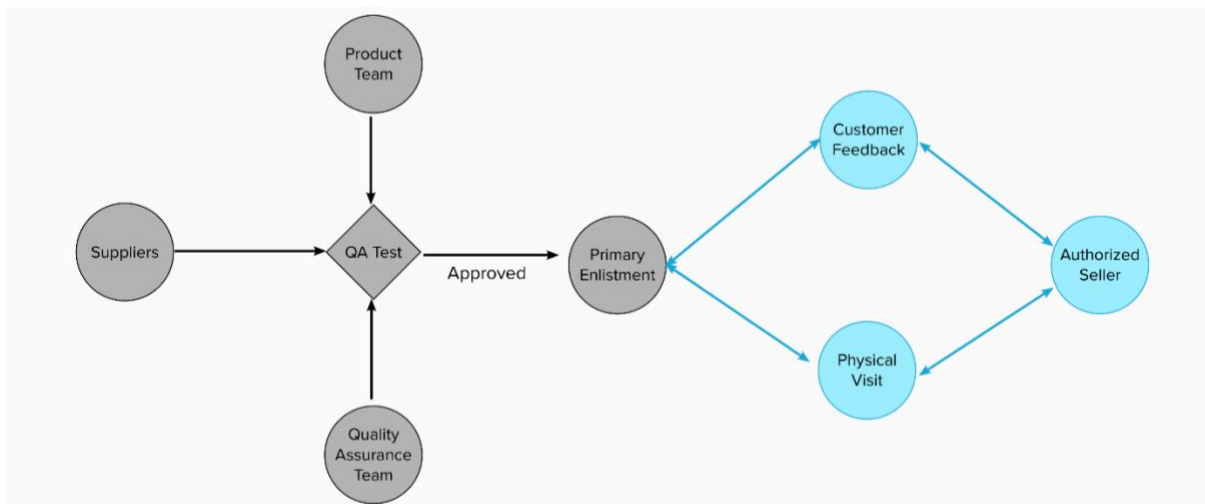
Figure 23 depicts this process; the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of the Start-up F in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

Routine 2: How Start-up F checks suppliers

To attract customers, Start-up F listed high-quality products in their e-commerce platform. Start-up F had a typical supplier verification and quality assurance procedures. The procedure is as following:

1. Start-up F had an application and verification process for its suppliers as part of its onboarding procedure. Before being able to sell on the Start-up F platform, suppliers had to fulfil a list of requirements, including having a tax identification number, and a business registration document.

Figure 24: The supplier's quality checking process in Start-up F



2. To ensure that suppliers' items match the company's quality standards, the start-up quality control team regularly inspected them. This process included looking over the product packaging, expiration dates, and checking in there are any flaws.

The entire process is depicted in the figure 24; the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of the Start-up F in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

Routine 3: How start-up F conduct Product Data Analysis

Start-up F kept track of the sales volume, revenue, and sales growth for each of its goods. Furthermore, Start-up F identified popular products and improved its product offers with the use of this data. The flow of information circulated as follows:

1. The management team requires monthly sales and marketing result from the commercial team.
2. The commercial team requested sales and marketing data to the data analysis team.

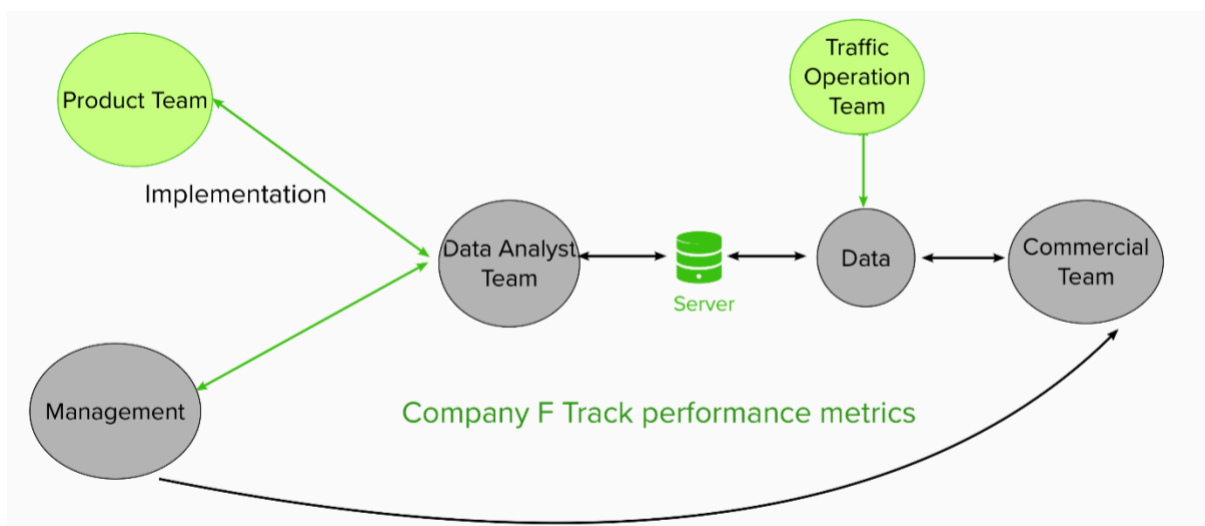
3. Data analysis team collects and analyses sales information from a variety of sources, such as CRM systems, social media insights and web traffic. And then send the data to the commercial team.
4. The commercial team creates presentation and report from the sales and marketing data.
5. Commercial team share the report and give presentation to the management team.

Start-up F evaluated the effectiveness of its marketing initiatives by monitoring conversion and click-through rates. This data helped Start-up F in streamlining its marketing initiatives and increasing product sales. (Ex-employee, Start-up F)

Start-up F operated marketing and sales campaign successfully, and they were able to onboard a large number of users. But the start-up failed to keep track of product ratings and feedback from the customers. That is the only reason the start-up forced to close the business operation.

If Start-up F observed customer's feedback, determined client satisfaction level, improved the service where necessary and adjusted based on customer's need then the company might have become a top e-commerce of the country. (Ex-employee, Start-up F)

Figure 25: The product performance tracking in Start-up F



The figure 25 depicts this entire process; the back circle and black arrow represent the actual workflow of the Start-up F in comparison with successful Start-up C's workflow.

4.6 Overview of the empirical data

In this sub-chapter we give an overview of the empirical data (table 4). We listed how important are the given routines for the start-ups, how many people are involved, and how often this routine is utilised within the organisation.

Table 4: An overview of the empirical data

Interviewee	Company Type	Routine	How important is this routine according to the management? High/Moderate/ Low	How many people are involved in the process?	How often is this routine used in the organisation? Daily basis /monthly basis/ never
Start-up C	Successful	Empowering self-organisation of task and time	High	6	Daily
		Checking suppliers' quality	High	6	Daily
		Track Performance Metrics	High	5	Daily
Start-up D	Successful	Empowering self-organisation of task and time	High	4	Daily
		Checking suppliers' quality	Moderate	n/d	Weekly
		Track Performance Metrics	High	4	Daily
Start-up A	Surviving	Empowering self-organisation of task and time	Moderate	0	Never
		Checking suppliers' quality	Moderate	2	Monthly
		Track Performance Metrics	High	2	Monthly
Start-up B	Surviving	Empowering self-organisation of task and time	High	0	Never
		Checking suppliers' quality	High	3	Monthly
		Track Performance Metrics	High	3	Weekly

Start-up E	Failed	Empowering self-organisation of task and time	Moderate	0	Never
		Checking suppliers' quality	High	2	Monthly
		Track Performance Metrics	High	2	Monthly
Start-up E	Failed	Empowering self-organisation of task and time	High	0	Never
		Checking suppliers' quality	High	3	Monthly
		Track Performance Metrics	High	3	Monthly

5. Analysis and Discussion

In this chapter we will perform the analysis of the empirical data through the lenses of the theoretical background. We will also discuss and find out the answers to our Research Question and the supporting sub-questions. The routines from the empirical data gave us a sense of the way how the interviewed organisations behave. As Nelson and Winter (1982) have mentioned, organisational routines help us to understand the behaviour and the way of changing of an organisation. Therefore, we will try to grasp the behaviour of the interviewed start-ups through the interpretation and comparison of their routines. This will allow us as to discuss and problematise different factors involved in these findings.

5.1 Overview of the routines applied in start-ups in the scale-up process

As we mentioned in the beginning of our study, our point of departure is the fact that Bangladesh's economy currently grows at such extent that this region has offered in the last years an adequate economic environment for the development of e-commerce start-ups. Start-up founders are aware of this accelerated growth. For example, the rate start-ups enrolling in the e-commerce association increased by 260% in 2020 compared with 2019 (table 3). This

rate shows that due to the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the e-commerce start-ups business started to grow rapidly. This rate, however, decreased significantly in 2021.

Most of the start-up founders we have interviewed are in the quest of developing their skills and learning, therefore, they read plenty of self-help and motivational books. The interviewees shared thus contemporary business concepts that they apply in their day-to-day business. However, none used the term “organisational routine” as such during the interview. Meaning probably that, even if they are implementing routines in their organisations, this mostly came out of practice, rather than through theoretical knowledge.

As Lee et al., (2007) mentioned, routines are not formed straight away in an organisation, Start-up C mentioned, for instance, that they did not have the routine 1 at the early stage. It was rather implemented later on in the organisation, and once they saw the benefit of it, they “retained” this routine (Petland, et al., 2012). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning here that none of the start-ups from the empirical data were over-using routines, meaning none had too many procedural checks, etc. that could threaten the performance of the organisation. This may be also explained by the fact that the organisations are still young. A point of further research could be at what point do organisation start to over-burden themselves with routines.

Furthermore, Levitt and March (1988) mentioned that routines can be understood as *forms, rules, procedures, conventions, strategies and technologies*. In the case of the three routines that we analysed, we can identify them in the form of 1) procedures, 2) strategies and seldom in the form of 3) technologies, as follows:

1. Most of the start-ups developed a procedure for implementing those routines, some are quite explicit (e.g. Start-up C regarding routines 1, 2 and 3), while others are lacking some details (e.g. Start-up B - routine 1) or others only mentioned them without explanations (e.g. Start-up D - routine 2).
2. We could detect the routines in the strategy form, most evidently in the case of Start-up C (routine 1), where we could grasp the strong vision that the management has for developing self-motivating employees and for continuing implementing this routine.
3. Concerning routines in the form of technologies, we could see in the case of the start-up C that this company has a software for internal learning management system (LMS). In this system, the employees can login-in and learn from different skills development contents at their self-learning pace. Besides this, start-up C also organises different online and offline skills

development trainings. Moreover, if a supervisor observes there is any skills gap, then they check if any pre-recorded contents are available or not. If there is any pre-recorded content available, then the capacity development team directly shares that link through the learning management system. Employees need to complete that course within certain time, and they also need to give an online test to proof their competency.

In addition, coming back to crucial aspects of routines mentioned by Becker and Lazaric (2009), we can underline the following:

1) The way in which organisations perform their tasks:

Even if we have asked the start-ups about how they implement the same type of routine, their way of implementing varies from start-up to start-up. We can see that every start-up has a different way to accomplish their task, the regularity and quality of the routine differ, which in turn governs the prosperity of the start-up. For example, Start-up C has more or less well explained procedures in all the three routines. The employees are aware about other colleagues who are involved in the same chain of activities, and they know how the process is developing from the start to the end. On the other extreme, there is Start-up F, which is more chaotic in performing its tasks. The chain of activities is less specific² and this in turn leads to registering plenty of mistakes performed by its employees (routines 2 and 3). Being less organised in their routines, affected the well-being of the organisation as they received negatives reviews from the customers. Given these facts, we can conclude that we can indeed read the behaviour of an organisation through its organisational routines.

2) The evolution of an organisation over time:

The most prominent routine for highlighting this crucial aspect is the routine 1: empowering self-organisation of task and time. In general terms, we could understand how the organisation has developed over time due to either the good or only the superficial implementation of this routine. Thanks to this routine, Start-up C and D (the successful ones) have been able to assure the retention of its employees, spreading in such a way a credibility in the success of the organisation. Start-up C clearly shows us this evolution through implementing routine 1. As it

² We need to consider here that the chain of activities is less specific also because we interviewed ex-employees of Start-up F, who might not recall every detail.

was mentioned in the interview, the start-up grew from 5 employees to 945 full time employees. This confirms the Pentland et al., (2012) approach of having dynamics of organisational routines, where the company retain a pattern of activity that proved to be successful.

On the opposite extreme, we have Start-ups E and F (the failed ones), where we also could track the evolution of the organisation over time, however, not on a positive note. This is so because the latter were not concerned about empowering self-organisations of their employees as a routine. Similarly, Start-up A, also does not empower employees to take decisions by their own, restricting them to a very limited key personnel. As a result, over time, Start-up A has a high fluctuation of employees.

3) How organisations accumulate, transfer, and apply organisational capabilities:

The management teams of Start-ups C and D (the successful ones) have a vision to empower their employees and enable them to act and take decisions in certain situations. This is an example of decentralising the decision-making process, where employees become able to learn through trial-and-error. Whenever an employee makes a wrong decision, they personally learn from it and in addition they share the learning and gained experience as a case in an internal common platform where others can have the opportunity to learn from the case. This helps other employees to get aware of the initiative and the result. As a part of a routine, these start-ups have weekly and monthly reporting meetings in which employees share then these cases with other colleagues. These successful start-ups create such culture of organisation and storage of experience in the organisation's memory which is a source of new knowledge. Therefore, through the routines mentioned above, they transfer the knowledge and improve organisation capabilities. Through this example, we could also see that routines are implemented in a collective way forming the collective intellectual capabilities of the start-ups. This chain of activities creates organisational memory, which we could see stores and retrieves lessons learned from the past (Levitt and March, 1988) and in such a way, shapes the future performance.

On the opposite side of the barricade, there is start-up E, which shows us that the flow of information in the organisation is affected when there is almost no routinised work. In this start-up, none of the employee involved i.e. in the routine 3, were aware of the entire development process. Employees were not aware of their connection with other employees

engaged in the same chain of activities. This stopped the organisation from achieving a collective learning and in such a way create an organisational memory.

5.2 The two perspectives of routines in the interviewed start-ups

From the empirical data we can see that some of the interviewed start-ups use the three routines as a source of change while others as a source of stability.

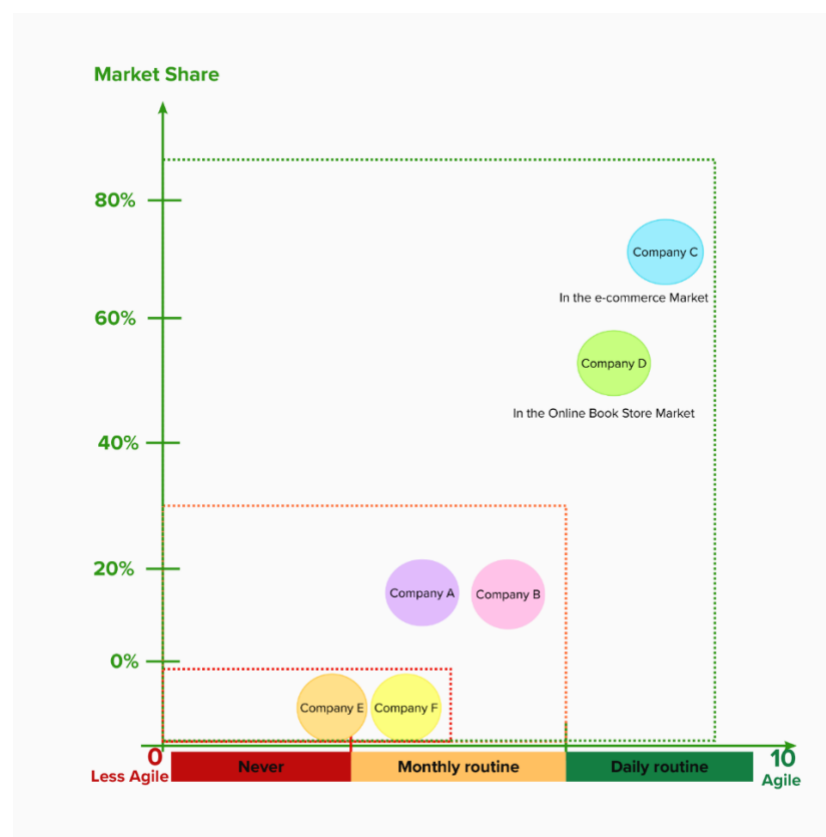
It seems that employees from Start-up C and D understand the trace of activities they perform and make sense of them. As March (1981) mentioned, it is not required to do extraordinary things in order to achieve change through routines, the essential thing is to perform the tasks in a competent way, as start-ups mentioned above do. To explain how change was performed in Start-up C, we mention the following: the organisation initially had one level of authentication to verify the supplier (routine 2), a process which was stable until a certain moment when they saw the flows of it. Mainly, the start-up C sensed that it was not enough to protect their system from scammers only through a single authentication process. Therefore, they had introduced a second level of authentication to secure that the customers are getting the authentic products on time. This is one of the patterns of change that helped them become successful in the scale-up process.

Start-up A and B have overall a stability approach but with some traces of change. Stability in Start-up A could be mostly seen through the implementation of routine 2. Mainly, the organisation was not constantly searching for new suppliers of honey for receiving higher benefits out of it, but it was rather searching for the more convenient ones. After the start-up was pleased with the identified supplier, the organisation just stucked to it. As Nelson and Winter (1982) mentioned, it is important how intensively the organisation is searching for better options. However, Start-up A showed that the organisation is mostly concerned about the easiness of achieving the task in relation with the minimal received benefits. So, the change in Start-up A is not much evident because the start-up makes minor steps into it. As we mentioned above, the company was searching for a supplier until a certain point, mainly, until it was safe enough to search. Hence, their change stopped and was transformed into stability. We may deduce that the start-up A does not approach much change because it associates it with higher risks (e.g. risks for which other suppliers have a payment and credit terms that are not suitable for start-up A).

On the extreme side, Start-up F and E (the failed ones) approached routines as a stability factor (if we can categorise it so). The stability was not for the benefit of the company, but rather out of a mindless work. By implementing those routines, the employees made plenty of mistakes, meaning that they did the work without paying much thinking to it. So, it was out of necessity rather than understanding the value behind their work (Fledman and Pentland, 2003).

The frequency of implementing routines also plays a significant role in the success of the organisation. A higher frequency of performing routines makes the organisation more agile and therefore capable of reaching the state of the routines as a source of flexibility and change (e.g. Start-up C), while a lower frequency makes an opposite impact, where the company is less agile and less inclined to change and adapt (e.g. Start-up E) (figure 26). Those two start-ups who failed (E and F) did not do much of any of the three routines. Even if they might have conducted some tasks related to empowering the employees, tracking the product performance and checking the supplier's quality, these tasks were done occasionally and therefore were not routinised (as according to what the ex-employees remembered).

Figure 26: The different routine intervals and their impact in the start-up



The dynamics of organisational routines (Petland, et al., 2012) could be traced mostly in the Start-up C. More exactly, from the variations of all routines, the management retains the ones that bring benefits for the organisation (e.g. routine 1 was retained and practiced since a long time). This pattern of activity done by Start-up C also proves one of the mechanisms of change covered by Levitt and March (1988), namely that organisations adopt the routine that proves the best to be successful.

On the contrary, Start-up A, as explained above, retains not the routines that are the most beneficial but rather the ones that are cost-time effective (e.g. the procedure of honey supplier sourcing in routine 2 was retained only because it was easier to implement and was not considered to make huge difference at first sight). The latter in turn does not show any dynamics but rather a source of stability, inasmuch as it reflected the limited receptivity from the organisation's part and the organisation had a reduced tendency for search (Weiss and Ilgen, 1985; Levitt and March, 1988).

In a nutshell, based on the empirical data, we can then deduce that the more organised a start-up is in terms of routines, the more agile and successful it becomes. Therefore, we can conclude that organisational routines might improve the start-up performance and encourage change, and create in such a way a competitive advantage (Stinchcombe's, 1990). However, as Becker and Zirpoli (2009) mentioned, it would be biased to say that only routines contributed to the agility and successfulness of the start-ups. We should also consider the management style of those start-ups. It was evident from the empirical data that successful start-ups had more or less a decentralised system while the failed one a centralised system. A deeper analysis of this relationship should be a focus for further research.

In the literature review we stated that for the purpose of this thesis, we would associate exploration with the source of change and exploitation with the source of stability.

Indeed, while analysing the exploration approach of routines we could see the patterns of change. We discussed above about the difficulties of adopting the routines as a source of change in the Start-up A, referring mainly to the sourcing of their honey suppliers. Theoretically, as the organisation mentioned, there is a brainstorming process and the organisation searched for new suppliers until they find the one that met the organisation's needs. These are indeed the aspects of exploration, however, in practice the organisation was not really open for a fully explorational approach, as they switched to the most convenient option, starting therefore a

new process - the exploitative one. We suppose that during this exploitation phase, the start-up repeating the same pattern started to do things faster (March, 1995), which can be in turn associated to routines as a source of stability.

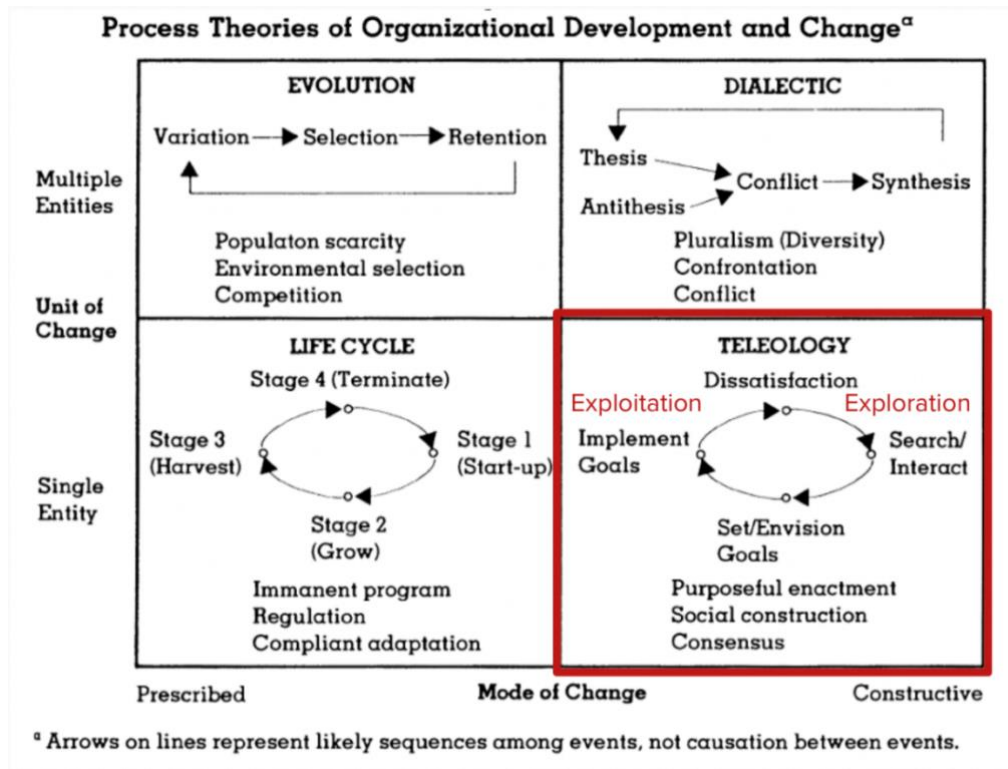
The exploration and exploitation approach could be more evidently sensed in the case of start-up C, specifically in relation to the routine 1 “empowering self-organisation of task and time”. As Start-up C’s employee mentioned: “When a supervisor finds a potential employee to develop his skills or finds some employees who has a skill gap, they forward to the capacity development department for skill development training”. This means that the routine in this start-up is a continuous search for skill gaps that they need to cover. The exploration also appears when the organisation searched for the required trainers. First, they searched among their existing contacts, then they extended their search among national trainers and afterwards, among international trainers. We can say that there is no end for the explorational approach in this routine, as the start-up is in a continuously search. However, this does not mean that the organisation is only searching and not implementing what it found. The exploitation is performed every time when the capacity development team get the requisition to conduct the trainings from the multiple departments, and the challenging part comes when this team needs to facilitate those trainings within limited time and resources. This process of exploration and exploitation, as we could see is cyclical one.

5.3 The way start-ups change

Through the teleological model we can see how the process of goal formulation, goal evaluation and goal modification takes place in an organisation (van de Ven and Poole, 1995), in our case, in start-ups. We regard the searching/interacting process as an exploration phase, the start-up being in the search for innovative business models, products, or services (Haase and Elberl, 2019), and when it finds the appropriate goal then it starts implementing it, meaning that it enters the exploitation phase (figure 27).

Through this model, we can show that change in an organisation takes place both from exploration and exploitation. This model approaches the change of an organisation, and what we suggest to understand this change as finding a balance between exploration and exploitation (March, 1991).

Figure 27: Process theories of Organisational development and Change
(van de Ven and Poole, 1995, with modifications made by authors)



Through this model of change, the goal formulation, goal evaluation and goal modification was most prominently seen in the case of Start-up C, which after exploring ways to grow their business, the start-up introduced the concept called Cash on Delivery (meaning that customers would pay their products only after it was handed over to the customer at his/her door). The main reasons of this new concept were that the customers were reluctant to up-front payments without seeing the product; many potential customers had no access to a banking card; and some were afraid of being scammed. So, the company switched from traditional system to an innovative (out of the ordinary) solution which helped them to reach more customers and get more traction as well as gain customer's trust and confidence. The start-up started an exploitative approach by implementing this new concept. So, this cycle of change is supposed to be continuous.

5.4 The contribution of the three routines to the start-ups

Throughout our study, we focused on three routines. Let us state the importance and the impact of these routines upon the start-ups in the scale-up process.

5.4.1 Empowering self-organisation of task and time (routine 1)

The importance of this routine can be highlighted through the following:

- Start-ups frequently encounter unexpected challenges as they operate in rapidly evolving markets. The ability to adapt to these changes and act quickly to address issues and opportunities is better suited to self-organisation employees.
- Start-ups usually operate on a low budget due to their limited resources. Employees who self-organise can help to simplify procedures, reduce bureaucratic procedures and come up with creative fixes for issues.
- In Bangladesh it is very difficult to hire qualified resources in a start-up as prospective employees think that that would constitute a huge risk because the company can shut down anytime. So, developing self-organisation employees helps to make young professionals a qualified resource which can help the company to go to the next level.

Start-up founders in Bangladesh faced significant challenges from market, competition and the overall ecosystem but they are very determined and emotionally attached in building the organisation. They have tried to involve in all the micro level, day-to-day activity rather than involving themselves in macro level work. The co-founders of the two start-ups that are in a surviving stage, are involved in all levels of activity: supplier sourcing, financing, marketing, product development, recruiting and operation. Therefore, they serve more than 10-12 hours a day and are overburden with all these responsibilities. That is one of reasons that most start-ups in Bangladesh have not been able to successfully scale-up the business, as they did not empower their employees to self-organisation of time and tasks.

5.4.2 Check the supplier quality (routine 2)

This routine is a common practice for all organisations, except that what differs from company to company are the specific procedures. Let us highlight why this routine is important:

- E-commerce businesses depend on their suppliers to deliver high-quality goods that match the client expectations. Conducting supplier inspections can assist in ensuring that suppliers are producing products that are safe, dependable and suitable to meet the requirements of the e-commerce company.

- In return, the reputation of their brand is key to the success of e-commerce businesses. A company's reputation can be harmed and lead to a loss of clients if its suppliers provide poor-quality products, incur delivery delays or have other problems.
- There are plenty of fraudulence and dishonest suppliers who took the order but did not deliver the product.

5.4.3. Product Data Analysis (routine 3)

As usually, let us highlight why this routine is important:

- In order to understand client behaviour, preferences and purchasing trends, e-commerce enterprises need to analyse customer data. The consumer experience can be enhanced with this information, which can also be utilised to customise marketing campaigns and enhance product offerings.
- E-commerce companies must effectively manage their inventory to guarantee that goods are available when buyers need them. Product data analysis can assist firms in demand forecasting, inventory optimisation, and stockout prevention.
- To know which products to restock, according to a higher or lower demand in a particular time.

Having all the details mentioned above, let us summarise our work by emphasising how organisational routines can improve start-ups' performance and encourage change in the organisation, mainly in the scale-up stage (table 5).

Table 5: How the three routines encourage change and performance

Routine	How does it encourage change?	How does it improve performance?
Empowering self-organisation task and time	1. Help in generating new ideas. 2. Changes are adopted quicker. 3. Help in grabbing knowledge faster.	1. Less resources required. 2. Increase dedication and ownership. 3. Required less supervision.

Routine	How does it encourage change?	How does it improve performance?
Checking suppliers' quality	1. The business supply chain gets stronger. 2. Stop fake supplier infiltrate into the start-up.	1. Less chance of bad customer reviews. 2. Assures 100% supplier delivery 3. Increases positive word of mouth which further leads to higher profits.
Track Performance Metrics	1. Generate new product ideas which in turn brings more suppliers and more customers on the platform. 2. Solve customers' known problems.	1. Give accurate market insights. 2. Help in obtaining a competitive advantage on the market.

6. Conclusion and final remarks

No matter how big companies are and how much resources they have, they are all vulnerable to failure. In today's fast changing world, when we face wicked problems such as Covid-19, war and extreme financial turbulence, then it is difficult for a start-up to navigate towards growth. Furthermore, the immature business ecosystem in Bangladesh makes the start-ups more vulnerable to failing during the scale-up process.

In order to provide innovative and mature ideas to improve the Bangladeshi e-commerce, it seems convenient to extract the lessons of failures (i.e. from the failed start-ups) and turn them into potential case studies for prospective entrepreneurs. In other words, we should once again acknowledge that the wisdom of learning from failure is incontrovertible (Edmondson, 2011). Also, we need to learn from the best practices (from the successful start-ups). So, it seemed reasonable to study routines in this case, since routines are able to capture the experimental lessons of the past (Levitt and March, 1988).

We cannot firmly affirm as a general rule that through implementing routines, start-ups in the scale-up process will achieve exceptional results. Our conclusion is rather that routines are a

source for consideration of what start-ups in the scale-up process should do. To answer the Research Question - *what role do organisational routines play in start-ups in their scaling-up stage?* -, we can affirm that organisational routines can sustain start-ups in the scale-up process by enabling change that would lead to increased adaptability and competitiveness, and in turn ensure growth.

We found the following benefits of implementing the three identified routines.

Routine 1: Empowering employees in start-up scale-up process is very crucial because it increases productivity, motivation and capacity of the employees. It improves organisational culture of ownership and accountability. That enables start-ups to decentralise the organisation and foster fast growth.

Routine 2: By ensuring supplier quality in different steps, an e-commerce start-up ensures authentication and guarantee of a supplier product. It ensures consistent and reliable products performance by reducing the rate of defects and failure. Moreover, ensuring supplier quality will minimise the need of product return and complaints, which leads to positive customer experience, making them potential loyal customers.

Routine 3: Tracking product performance in the scale-up process increases overall sales by getting valuable insights of customer preferences, identifying customer needs and expectations. These insightful data help to make the decision-making process faster and refine product offerings and marketing strategies. That will ultimately drive more sales traction and generate revenue growth.

Can organisational routines improve start-ups' performance and encourage change in the scaling-up process? We found a relevant impact of routines in start-ups while scaling-up the company.

These routines that we investigated showed that they can create a difference in the growth of the organisation. Successful start-ups implement routines, and they constantly assess them and adjust accordingly, therefore, they were able to give us as much details as possible. Furthermore, these start-ups were conscious about the benefits of implementing those three routines. Surviving start-ups implement routines not as regularly as the successful ones, and they have a small degree of being chaotic. Moreover, they are less explicit in detailing their work, meaning that routines are performed mindlessly. For the surviving and failing start-ups

it is essential to recognise the necessity of introducing routines in their processes and act consciously. Lastly, failing start-ups organise their work by chance and do not follow any visible routines.

From the empirical data we could see that start-ups in the scale-up process implement routines and that routines shape the behaviour of the organisation. Each start-up acted differently in similar situations, and this may be a source of determining the success or failure of the organisation. We can conclude that implementation of routines might be beneficial for start-ups in the scale-up process, only with the condition of always assessing the routines and keeping an agile mode.

Organisational routines play a vital role in the development of start-ups during the scale-up process for several reasons. We will focus on those that bear a direct influence upon the organisation:

1. Organisational routines provide the foundation of change in an organisation by identifying the bottlenecks of existing processes and refining and adjusting them through mindful acts.
2. Organisational routines provide the foundation of scalability by establishing standardised processes that can be repeated and scaled throughout the organisation.
3. Organisational routines ensure productivity by reducing ambiguity and by enabling coordination among the team members.
4. Organisational routines contribute to the transfer and retention of knowledge that in turn enable employees to improve their capacity and skills.
5. Organisational routines optimise the processes which in turn help start-ups to handle increased pressure and high workload during the scale-up stage.
6. Organisational routines help in managing tasks so that to reduce faults and oversights.

The importance of routines in the start-up context should be further researched, as we could see a potential in this field. Considering the limitations of this study, we advise further research comprising a larger sample of start-ups in the scale-up process as well as a longer period for the analysis.

To conclude in one sentence, start-ups should consciously organise their business processes and search for ways of changing in order to adapt and sustain their business. The way in which such processes are made is to think of them in terms of organisational routines.

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